Draco Black and the Prisoner of Nurmengard

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/27824563.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death, Underage Sex
Categories:	F/M, Gen, M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter, Sirius Black/Remus Lupin, Neville Longbottom/Luna Lovegood, Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley, Albus Dumbledore/Gellert Grindelwald, Hermione Granger & Draco Malfoy, Draco Malfoy & Severus Snape, Gilderoy Lockhart/Severus Snape
Characters:	Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, Severus Snape, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Dobby (Harry Potter), Millicent Bulstrode, Albus Dumbledore, Gellert Grindelwald, Bellatrix Black Lestrange, Gilderoy Lockhart
Additional Tags:	Time Travel, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Unreliable Narrator, Anti-Hero, Morally Grey Draco Malfoy, Dom/sub, Pensieves (Harry Potter), Blood Magic, Mirror of Erised, The Deathly Hallows, Betrayal
Language:	English
Series:	Part 6 of The Mirror of Ecidyrue
Collections:	Harry Potter - The Best (by Peftasteria), Can I Get Uhhh Sleep Deprivation, Keep Reading, Favorite Harry Potter Fanfics, He was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy, Incomplete Fics to Track, I love these fics, god tier (in my heart forever), Harry Potter favfics aka works of art, Marvel Percy Jackson and Harry Potter favorites, Harry Potter Bests, The best fics, did someone say time travel, drarry, He was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy, Fanfic Is My Life, HP, Fav
Stats:	Published: 2020-12-01 Completed: 2022-01-07 Words: 323,728 Chapters: 34/34

Draco Black and the Prisoner of Nurmengard

by starbrigid

Summary

WHORE. BLOOD TRAITOR. MURDERER.
I will accept no restitution but your life.

Those are the words Theo sent Draco, once Draco Malfoy and now Draco Black. The words Draco will never tell anyone that Theo sent. As Draco enters into that fatal sixth year, those are the words that hang over him as he tries to protect his friends, his new family, his godfather. As he tries to protect the boy he loves from the boy he once loved, whose life he ruined with one curse. But Draco has another word now: Dantanian. The key to his wand, to his blood, to the past, to three mirrors, and to his aunt waiting to take her own forfeit from him. The pursuit of Dantanian will take Draco beyond his own past, to truths too horrifying to accept, and acts too evil to speak. To the Prisoner of Nurmengard.

Notes

Hey, everyone! Welcome to sixth year! -waves- I'm excited and scared ^^ I hope everyone will enjoy, and I look forward to hearing everyone's thoughts on everything I've got planned.

Standard warning for unreliable narration, moral grayness, trauma and depression, and serious graphic violence and gore. This year, there are also warnings for sex acts, BDSM, child abuse, incest, references to dub/con, abuse of power, major character death, and Bellatrix Lestrange.

Playlist

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 德拉科布莱克与纽蒙迦德的囚徒 by Asuka041942

Dragonslayer

The first time Draco was allowed to use dark magic in a practice duel with Sirius was the first time he won. It nearly killed his uncle, but that was a small price for a win.

He faithfully kept a running tally of their results, in preparation of showing Severus once he got back to Hogwarts. Not that there wasn't far more reason than just impressing his godfather to push himself at dueling. There was the small matter of Bellatrix Lestrange, no doubt thirsting for a rematch. And that phrase she and Mother had thrown at him, *Dantanian Noir*, maybe a name and maybe not, which no one around him seemed to know a thing about at all. Aunt Bella knew that weakness of his, and he didn't. Which meant that he couldn't *have* any other weaknesses.

"Vipera relashio," Draco kept telling Sirius as they exited their dueling room. "The counter-curse is Vipera relashio, *obviously*. I used Serpensmorta on Aunt Bella and she just cast Vipera relashio and kept on against me, this isn't helping if you can't replicate what she-"

"Draco," Sirius gasped, while Hermione and Remus rose from the table in alarm at the sight of his scale-indented throat. "I know you lost a duel to your aunt and you're upset about it, but I nearly *died*, could you give me a *second*?"

"*Aunt Bella* won't give *me* a second," Draco sulked, "If we ever duel again," and watched Remus start up the kettle while Hermione eyed them disapprovingly.

"I told you so," Hermione said, and Sirius gave her a look while massaging his throat, like he regretted that blanket permission to stay over. She and Draco intended to make use of it until Harry hopefully passed his test and came to stay permanently. Weekly dinners over with the Grangers were the one night Sirius and Remus had to themselves. "I told you it wouldn't be so easy to keep beating him if you let him use dark-"

"He's vicious with it," Remus said quietly. "And you take that as a compliment, don't you, Draco?" He looked to find little humor in the situation, and ignored Sirius's puppyish whining to come kiss his neck better. Sirius was left calling forlornly after him, still vainly showing off the snake marks, but that was Sirius for you. He couldn't be any more whipped if Charlie Weasley started lending them dragontamer tools.

"He's our Frankenstein, of course," Hermione sighed. "Stop *beaming*, Draco, it's like you *want* people to think you're a rising dark lord. How many times do I have to tell you it's not like winning a *pageant*-"

"It is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two," Draco quoted, earning a look that made him wilt into his chair. "What? You're the one who gave-"

"I don't know what I was thinking," Hermione sighed, "Giving Draco Malfoy *Machiavelli*."

She only realized her mistake when the room went silent. The only sound was the shrieking of the kettle, like the name had let loose some unspoken pain into the air.

"You mean Draco Black," Remus said, voice not admonishing, but firm.

"Draco *Lupin* Black," Draco corrected with a grin. "Don't look so sad, Hermione, I know people will forget at first. I like the excuse to say it again. Draco Lupin Black."

"Draco Lupin Black, successor to Voldemort?" Hermione asked wanly.

Draco was proud of her habit of always saying Voldemort's name, like Sirius and Remus did. If he wasn't quite at that point, it was an aesthete's disdain, for a name from an imperfect anagram.

"Successor to *Grindelwald*," he corrected, throwing his arms back dramatically.

"See, this is why we need to watch what books we give him," Hermione said to Sirius. "Two years ago, Luna gives him the manifestos of Grindelwald, and a year later, his entire year in Slytherin is calling him Grindelwald." Draco tried not to hear Theo's voice in his head using the nickname. He touched his watch, an old present from Harry, to call on a reliable distraction from thoughts he didn't want to have. "It's a pernicious-"

Sirius shrugged. "You're the one who started calling him Frankenstein, right?"

"That was a joke at first," Hermione said defensively. "Before I'd seen Frankenstein's workshop. Speaking of which, Sirius, I know you're probably too *proud*, but you should really let Draco give you some angel's infusion..."

Frankenstein's workshop was her name for the potionmaking space, where Draco had his draught of peace and angel's infusion cauldrons forever brewing, along with Wolfsbane he had taken back up making. Laboring for Remus, who at the moment was giving Draco that gentle but skeptical look that never failed to yield dividends. "Draco Lupin Black, if you want me to give you any tea, you will kindly stop *posing*."

"Moony!" Draco whined, "Spoilsport," but put his arms down and accepted his mug. Remus made too mean a cup of tea to fight for his right to pose in the kitchen. Even if he didn't know how he was supposed to start striking terror into the hearts of millions, if no one let him *practice*.

"So," Hermione observed as they went up the stairs. "You strangled your uncle with snakes."

"No need to be jealous, Striker, I can teach you the spell whenever you like," Draco teased, and she began to work up one of her most disapproving looks, only for it to fall away when Kreacher brushed past, going down the stairs grumbling.

"Oh, hello, Kreacher! Goodnight!" Hermione called.

"Filthy Mudblood presuming to speak to Kreacher, oh, yes, this place has gone to the dogs, if Kreacher's mistress could see, but the invert blood traitor sliced up her portrait..."

Hermione stopped Draco going after him. "Don't use Langlock, it's not his fault..."

They comfortably resumed an old argument about nature vs. nurture and social conditioning as they reached the top floor. Hermione had to snag a book she had left in Regulus's room, which their major project was preparing to be Harry's room soon. For starters, they'd had to move a number of stolen items into Draco's closet. He'd tried to pretend he didn't get a kick out of potentially deadly dark artifacts sharing space with his best cashmere sweaters.

They lingered at Draco's door talking, first over Draco's habitual Bellatrix anxiety, then reviewing the bare basics they knew about 'Dantanian' from their research: name of a fallen angel, also written as Dantalion or Dantalian, which seemed to have little immediate significance save for the fact that these fallen angels cropped up with regularity in other pieces of Draco's life, like the name of the House Black citadel, and the name of the dragon whose heartstring pulsed inside the talon wand. 'Noir' being, of course, 'black' in French, suggested a House Black connection as well, although the French word was a complication- if it had just been Dantanian *Black*, well, that would have been simpler. These fallen angel names cropped up with similar regularity to the constellation names in Black naming traditions through the genealogical records, at one time even more common before seeming to fall out of fashion, and disappearing completely around the time of the headmaster Phineas. There had even been a Dantanian Black- one and only one, centuries and centuries ago, a man who had never married or borne children, a man of whom the records gave no information, save that he had been the founder of Citadelle Xaphan...

Tracing connections like this had gotten them approximately nowhere as of yet. Of far more use had been the dueling lessons, as well as the lessons in resisting the Imperius curse that Sirius had been giving Draco and Hermione both. But research gave Draco the illusion of some control, and it kept Hermione here, which kept his mind busy enough not to think about the carved-up painting in his closet. It was consolation for the fact that the chosen 'Order safehouse' for the Lovegoods was the Burrow and not here. That meant there was no room at the Burrow for Hermione. She had to stay here, if she wanted to practice magic without the Trace interfering.

The other reason Hermione had not been invited to the Burrow was clear the next morning at breakfast on the thirteenth. Sirius informed them he had been on the telephone with the Grangers, and they would have dinner with them on Sunday instead.

"Is everything alright with my parents?" Hermione asked, with an edge in her voice that showed the unspoken motive for living elsewhere: fear they would fall victim to the other side. Quaint, having parents one feared would get hurt, rather than hurt *you*.

"Of course, of course," Remus said hastily, "This is a treat, actually, I think you'll find. Look what came today." He reached into his pocket and pulled out two letters, making Hermione let out so piercing a scream, she was like a comic doing a middling Mandrake impression.

"OWL results! Oh, I hope, I hope they're good, please, please, give me," Hermione pleaded.

Draco should have mustered up curiosity, but he was more amused by Hermione than moved on his own accord. It was hard to think the contents of his letter mattered.

"We're opening them at the Burrow. Visiting for dinner tonight," Remus said, pocketing them. Hermione looked adorably sour, but Draco brightened.

"I get to see COUSIN?" Sirius nodded, and Draco hugged Hermione. "Luna-Luna!" Then he bit his lip, trying to control his face and make his voice more casual. "And, ah, Harry is still there, of course, right? If he's not too busy with his Occlumency lessons..." Draco hadn't thought he'd see Harry again until at least the first of August, when his examination with Dumbledore had been set.

"We'll get to see how Harry did on his OWLs as well!" Hermione exclaimed, smile as she added, "And Ron..."

Draco clamped a hand over his mouth. "So we're going to see Harry *today*?"

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Sirius advised breezily.

Remus heaved a sigh. "Oh, Padfoot, that isn't the *best* criteria..."

Draco ran up to his room to try on outfit after outfit. He was left bemoaning how few Muggle clothes he had, especially ones that weren't too warm for the weather. It turned out the forecast in the Muggle paper for down in Devon had the weather as cool and misty anyway. He ended up in the thinnest of the cashmere sweaters he'd gotten for Christmas from his mother.

He could probably still safely wear them. Mother was not the kind of person to have interfered, not with such fine craftsmanship, by something so gauche as interweaving sleeper curses into the wool.

Hermione found him fussing in the mirror. "Harry's not going to care how your hair looks-"

"I'll have you know Harry has always demonstrated a *keen* interest in my hair-"

"I mean," Hermione laughed, leaning on the doorframe and watching him fondly, "He'll be so excited to see you, he's not going to have much on his mind but..." Her cheeks turned pink as she trailed off. "That's what boys are like, isn't it?"

"Sometimes," Draco said. "I know I am." He put on his Opaleye necklace before turning and surveying Hermione, who had also dressed up more than usual. "You look *pretty*, Striker, wow." She had on jeans, a white denim jacket, and a dust-rose pink Henley. With her hair in a loose fishtail braid, he could see her becoming the stunning, almost princess-like girl he remembered at the end of the war. Ron was lucky that Draco had somehow become fond of him, because otherwise, he would be advising this girl to hold out for some foreign millionaire or something.

He got down his Ukrainian Ironbelly necklace and offered it to her. She lifted her braid and he fastened it around her neck, fussing with her jacket collar to make it perfect. She studied herself long enough in the mirror that Draco got his own sly smile. "Been wondering what boys our age are *like* recently, have you?"

"No!" Hermione screeched, obviously lying.

"Someone at the Burrow you want to impress?"

She played with the Ironbelly crossly. "I'm not wearing this, then, Frankenstein," she groused. "Not if the price is *uncouth suggestions*."

Draco hugged her from behind, nuzzling her shoulder with a surge of affection so strong it almost hurt, knowing neither of them were totally safe at any time anymore.

"I know you *say* you're not jealous that Luna and I have boyfriends now. That you don't have time for one with your studies, but if you wanted one- or a girlfriend, no judgment- you could tell me. I'd try and make it happen-"

"And that," Hermione said, paling, "Is exactly why I would *never* tell you anything like that. No *meddling*!" She turned and gave him a hug, long enough for him to notice she was wearing a new perfume, before they headed downstairs.

If she wasn't ready to acknowledge her feelings for Ron, he couldn't blame her. It had to be a thankless task, romancing an individual who in any reality had thought it a good idea to snog the human knitting cozy known as Lavender Brown.

No matter how much time Remus put into renovating Grimmauld, the contrast was always stark between it and the Burrow. Everything was lighter and livelier there, at least in the decor. Or most of it, as Ron warned before they went inside. Apparently the Weasley clock now had every hand pointing constantly to Mortal Peril. "Even Peter's?" Draco asked, and Ron nodded, with a look like that fact did provide some consolation for the rest of it.

"Oh, Remus! How good to see you!" Mrs. Weasley trilled, before greeting Sirius without nearly so much enthusiasm. Sirius and Remus exchanged pleasantries with her, before heading up the stairs to be the first ones to greet Harry, presumably with some business about the upcoming adoption to discuss. That let Mrs. Weasley give both Draco and Hermione firm hugs.

Draco hadn't seen her since his mother disowned him. He hoped she wouldn't feel compelled to make some gesture. But thankfully, she treated him the same. Her attention was taken up by Fleur Delacour, who had made her move and attached herself to Bill Weasley. Her mere presence seemed to be driving Ginny and Mrs. Weasley mad.

The sight of Ginny drove in a reality that had evaded Draco's notice. Harry was spending the month here. He had to, with Bill his Occlumency tutor, one that a rather charming if sheepish letter from Harry had informed Draco was faring rather better than Draco ever had- not, that was, because Draco had been a *bad* tutor. Far from it. Harry used all the visualizations that Draco had taught him and everything, Bill was just less *distracting*...

Draco had been happy Harry could be away from the Dursleys, and that Ron and Luna would have him there as a friend. After all, Draco would have Harry at Grimmauld for good soon enough. But that month at the Burrow did provide one thing that Draco's attempt to be patient hadn't accounted for: the presence of the girl that Draco had thought for so long Harry was fated to love. This was the summer before they got together in the blue loop, and must have laid the groundwork. His irrational resentment towards Ginny flared up tenfold, one not helped by their first acquaintance having been him unceremoniously stealing Riddle's diary from her. He couldn't bring himself to laugh at her jokes, even if Phlegm was an objectively

evocative appellation for Delacour, who Draco had never quite forgiven for snubbing Ron's invitation to the Yule Ball.

He forced a smile in response that had to look ghastly, before his face broke into a broad grin at the sound of a light melodic voice asking, "Oh, are they here yet?"

"COUSIN!" Draco charged for the stairs, picking Luna up. He gave her a whirl in the air on the way down. She hugged him tightly, only for them to have to move so Fleur could descend and greet everyone. Luna didn't seem to mind her, but she was the only one, as Remus and Sirius made their way back down the stairs, only to face their resident Veela. Even Remus, the most unflappably civil individual Draco had ever met, seemed to lose a bit of shine in her presence. Especially when she delivered her twin cheek-kisses to Sirius, and told him how handsome he was becoming after 'zat awful time in ze Azkaban'.

"'Arry!" Fleur yelled up the stairs. "Your boyfriend is 'ere!"

Sirius sighed affectionately. "He wanted to fix his hair before he let Draco see him," he laughed, before Remus sternly told him off for embarrassing his soon-to-be adopted son.

Ron snickered at the word. "He's still getting used to that, Frankenstein. Every time someone calls you Harry's boyfriend, he goes all flushed and giddy, like some first-year with a crush."

"He is, though," Draco said loudly, "My boyfriend," and hoped Fleur had not been giving any cheek-kisses to Harry. She had to be fond of him, as the savior of her sister in the tournament. Granted, he had no illusions Fleur would make a serious attempt to take anyone's man, having secured a specimen of a man like Bill. But he didn't like the idea of her lips anywhere near his Harry, or her Veela powers making Harry *enjoy* it. He wished he had taken yet more care with his appearance. He would look very plain in any room with Fleur Delacour.

"Will he be your boyfriend for long," Ginny asked slyly, "If he doesn't do well on his OWLs?" She giggled, as did Ron and Luna, but drew back at the intensity of Draco's glare. "I was just joking- he's been worrying about the results and what you'll think..."

She is *after him. I knew it.*

Draco had publicly staked his claim. How dare she even *hint* someone else might have a shot at Harry? Trying to provide the opportunity for some of that dark-lord-in-training practice he so desperately needed?

"He doesn't have to worry," Draco said tightly. "Whatever that OWL letter says, he's *mine*."

"And OWL results aren't something to joke about!" Hermione protested loyally, linking her arm with Draco's. "They'll determine our entire future- oh, hello, Harry, when do you think Mrs. Weasley is going to let us open our letters- well, alright then," she sighed, as Harry came down the rest of the steps in a sprint and flung himself onto Draco.

It had been weeks, but it felt like years. Somehow Harry had contrived to look more grown-up and strong already, though that might be the tan, presumably from playing Quidditch most afternoons. Or maybe it was him seizing Draco's shoulders like almost all their friends

weren't watching them. If his hair was still wild despite his supposed attempts to tame it-well, Draco rather liked it that way.

"What did you expect?" Ron laughed, smirking at Hermione, "I knew they'd have a passionate reunion," only for the sight of Harry pressing a devoted kiss to Draco's neck to make him look at the ground, embarrassed. Ron had never seemed to care much about displays of affection between Harry and Draco before. *Is it that he's thought about doing the same with Hermione? A passionate reunion of their own*?

Draco's mind was dragged from his best friend's romantic prospects to his own, as Harry's teeth catching on his neck made his toes curl. "Harry," he gasped, "Let me go."

"Don't wanna," Harry mumbled, but obeyed, stepping away, vibrating with visible need as soon as they were no longer touching.

"Hello, Harry, it's nice to see you," Hermione said primly. Harry finally noticed her presence and gave her an embarrassed hug.

"Are you sure you do not 'ave any Veela blood?" Fleur asked Draco. "You seem to 'ave ze effect like a Veela on 'Arry Potter." Draco laughed, only to stop with a twinge when he heard what Ginny said to Hermione.

"We've been playing Quidditch every day," she was telling her, "Me and Ron and Harry, and then Luna and Bill sometimes join in to make it three on three, but with you and Draco here, we can have a proper game. Especially if Fred and George stop by before dinner..."

Nothing could be better calculated to make Harry notice Ginny than her Quidditch skills. "You've been playing a lot of Quidditch together, have you?" Draco asked tightly.

"Yeah, are you gonna wanna play this afternoon?" Ginny asked eagerly, "I'm going to try out for Chaser in the fall, I need all the practice I can get."

Draco cut off the urge to say something cutting in return. What *could* he say?

That was the frustrating thing. He couldn't even pretend she deserved his ire. She was similar in a lot of ways to Ron, who he adored, athletic and funny and high-spirited and stubborn. She was pretty and talented and loyal and even brave, which he had to acknowledge after they'd fought together at the Ministry. He had no way to justify his aversion to her other than the truth.

"I'm not playing Quidditch before I see my OWL results," Hermione protested, "Come on, if we all ask together, maybe we can get it out of them," and led them back towards the kitchen. Bill, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Sirius and Remus were now discussing Order business in hushed voices. They put on a nonchalant air when the others entered, but they couldn't hide the serious way they'd been talking, or the clock where every hand still read Mortal Peril.

Mr. Weasley greeted everyone warmly, before Hermione began to press the issue in her singularly bossy way. Mrs. Weasley wanted to make an occasion of it and open them at dinner, but her proposal was met only by whining, until the impasse was broken by Ginny

seizing all four letters and carrying them off. "You come back here, young lady!" Mrs. Weasley called after her, but it was too late. The students raced up the stairs and barricaded themselves in Fred and George's large, explosion-singed room. Hermione cast Colloportus, and eventually, Mrs. Weasley gave up.

"What order should you all go?" Ginny asked, settling on the bed to watch them with Luna.

"Reverse alphabetical," Ron said quickly. Ginny gave him his. He opened it and heaved a sigh of relief. "Bloody hell. Could have been worse."

"Let me see!" Hermione exclaimed, snatching it rather rudely.

Ron rolled his eyes but looked pleased with himself. "Only failed Divination and History of Magic, and who cares about them?" he boasted.

"I probably failed Divination too," Draco offered, and Hermione pushed at Harry's shoulder to get his, while Ron's were passed around.

"So you got seven OWLs?" Harry asked Ron, only for Hermione to seize Harry's and open it herself, inspecting it before thrusting it into his hand.

"Oh, they're just the same!" Hermione exclaimed. "Except Harry got an O in Defense." It was the only O, leaving Harry looking less satisfied than Ron.

"What?" Ginny asked, and Harry made a face in Draco's direction.

"I only got an E in Potions," Harry admitted. "That means I won't be able to get into his godfather's class. Which means I won't be able to take a Potions NEWT. Which means..." He threw his results aside. Luna picked them up, with a distant look on her face that meant she was probably wondering what Neville had gotten in Potions. Worse than an E, that would be a safe bet.

Draco shouldn't have used his future knowledge, but he couldn't bear to see Harry thinking he had wrecked his future before it began. "No, that was when Severus was Potions master," Draco interrupted, "But he's finally gotten the Defense job. And he'll be accepting students for that with Es as well as Os, Ron, don't worry..."

"How do you know that?" Ron asked skeptically. "I thought you and your godfather had, erm, limited contact, because he's..."

"He has his ways," Draco said haughtily.

"That makes sense," Harry said slowly, "Because Slughorn was the old Potions master. So that's where your godfather will go."

The cursed DADA post. Thrilling. But Draco forced a smile, as if he didn't know the way the year was likely to end for Severus. "Anyway, that's the deal with Potions and Defense. Can I have my letter now?" There was a strained silence as everyone in the room turned to him. "Reverse alphabetical, right? Come on, Malfoy comes after Granger in the- *oh*."

He looked down at his letter, addressed to Draco Lupin Black. He had forgotten his own name. "Very well, it's my turn," Hermione said briskly. She snatched her letter from Ginny and tore it open, only to look rather sulky. "Oh."

"Let me see," said Ron, taking it from her before letting out a whistle. Hermione clutched onto her Ironbelly necklace sadly. "Yep- nine Outstandings and one Exceeds Expectations in Defense Against the Dark Arts. You're actually disappointed?"

Hermione shook her head, but Luna said, "She's devastated, aren't you, Hermione?"

Draco hugged Hermione's side, but she still looked cross. "Laugh at me if you want," she said, shooting daggers at Ron. "You're certain your godfather will accept E students?" Draco nodded. "It's not that I'm upset I'm not perfect. It's the subject I was worst in. Defense. Not ideal, is it?"

"Because we're in a war, you mean?" Ginny filled in. "Mortal peril, constantly..."

"I only got an E in Defense too," Ron said. Hermione proved unwilling to say whatever cutting thing must have come into her head. Instead, she pushed Draco's letter into his hands.

"I bet Draco got an O in Defense," Ron offered unhelpfully, and earned a glare from Hermione that would have turned Draco into a puddle.

He steeled himself and opened his results. He knew Severus would want to know, or at least he hoped. This lack of communication over the summer was just for safety. Draco had to keep telling himself that. Severus still cared. Draco resolved to talk to Remus about communicating his results through Order channels, inconsequential as they were to the war.

Unless he didn't get an O in Potions. But that didn't prove to be a problem.

ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS

Pass Grades: Outstanding (O)

Exceeds Expectations (E)

Acceptable (A)

Fail Grades: Poor (P)
Dreadful (D)

Troll (T)

DRACO LUPIN BLACK HAS ACHIEVED:

Ancient Runes: O

Arithmancy: O

Astronomy: O

Care of Magical Creatures: O

Charms: O

Defense Against the Dark Arts: O

Divination: O

Herbology: O

History of Magic: O

Muggle Studies: O

Potions: O

Transfiguration: O

"What the fuck," Draco breathed, crumpling the paper in his hand. "What the *fuck*."

He'd gotten an O in Divination, even. *Divination.*

"Oh, no, Frankenstein, is it that bad?" Hermione wailed. "It can't be! Let me see!"

Draco kept the paper, trying to wrap his mind around what he had just seen. And why it had him feeling trapped. He crumpled the paper tighter into his fist.

"Oh, no, Draco," Luna said sadly, and snuggled his arm to her side. Hermione clasped one shoulder and Ron another, while Harry stared in disbelief.

"You couldn't have done badly, Draco, you're so brilliant," Harry said, and Draco wished he could prove him wrong.

But he assumed an actor's face, like it was all a ploy to trick them. "That's what you think, is it?" he asked, putting a convincing wobble into his voice, so much that Ron shot Harry a dirty glare.

"Can we at least see?" Hermione asked tentatively. "Maybe it's not so bad... you're probably being too hard on yourself..."

"Tell me what you think," Draco said, and handed her the sheet. She uncrumpled it, then let out a high-pitched shriek.

"Frankenstein!" she shrieked. "FRANKENSTEIN! HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?"

"That bad, huh?" went Ron, wincing in sympathy. Luna patted Draco's hand. Then she had to get out of the way as Hermione began to swat at Draco's shoulders in breathless indignation, flapping at him with the loose sleeves of her denim jacket.

"FRANKENSTEIN!" she bellowed incoherently. Finally, her borderline-speechless consternation did put a smile on Draco's face, making him feel some fraction of what he should.

"Why are you laughing?" Ginny asked suspiciously, and took the sheet from Hermione, only to gasp and grab onto Luna. "He's been having us on! He got all Os! All of them!"

"Draco, you're so awful," Hermione whined. Draco laughed and caught her up in a hug so she couldn't whack him anymore. Ron laughed hysterically, proving once more that he and Draco had the same sense of humor, while Ginny looked annoyed, Harry shocked, and Luna ecstatic.

"Oh, cousin!" Luna exclaimed, and ran over to hug him congratulations. "I didn't even think that could happen! Harry, can you believe it?"

"I can," Harry said. The smile spreading on his face was so radiant, there was no sign of the jealousy Draco might have feared, only more happiness than Draco felt for himself. "Draco's a miracle." He squeezed Draco's hand with a boyishly adoring smile.

Draco's stomach turned, guilty not to be happy. If he had done badly, he would have been furious. Was he determined to be unhappy no matter what happened?

If he looked around, omitting the matter of a war, things couldn't be better. After a rough start, he had four of the best friends anyone could dream of, one that he loved and was dating, another his genius best friend, another his beloved cousin, and then Ron, one of the funniest, most down-to-earth people he had ever met.

And yes, Ginny was here too, but you couldn't have everything.

He had Neville as a fifth real friend, off safe with his parents whom Draco had restored, and Sirius and Remus downstairs, adopted parents who'd given him their names and a real home. They were soon to take in the boy Draco loved, who somehow seemed to have contrived to throw aside all sense and love Draco back. He and not Harry was the current victorious Quidditch captain, of Slytherin, leave aside what Draco's actions last month would have done to his place in both that team and his house. He had all the money he could ever need, both Aunt Bella's stolen funds and the heirship to House Black. He had the Order to protect him, Hogwarts to attend in the fall, a powerful wand, and now test results that seemed to indicate he could be anything in the world he chose.

And the weight of the expectations that put on him went square between the ventricles of his chest and could not be removed.

He stayed in the room after everyone left for Quidditch. His cashmere sweater and slacks were hardly suitable for flying, so Harry had offered to let Draco borrow any of his clothes he wanted. Draco looked, reciting to himself in his head like a mantra, *You're glad you succeeded. You're glad you succeeded. You're glad you succeeded...*

He was glad he had succeeded when Harry came back and gave him a kiss for it. "Just wanted to say congratulations for being the cleverest ever," he said. Draco caught his hands and kept him from racing off. "Draco, they're waiting for us..."

"They can play without Seekers for a while. And here I didn't think we'd be alone till August. Are you really going to just bust in on me when I'm changing and leave-"

"I didn't think you'd still be changing! You were taking forever!"

Draco stretched, laying out on the bed in just Harry's trousers. "Are you complaining?" he remarked arrogantly. Harry's eyes followed him. "Didn't think so. Now, is that how you properly congratulate someone for twelve Os? I suppose it's a greater achievement for *you* to have gotten seven OWLS period..."

Instead of bantering, Harry looked sheepish. "You have to tell me if that makes you think I'm too dumb for you. I know it's a joke, but..."

"Do I *seem* like I'm suddenly repulsed by you?"

Harry's eyes took on a tentative confidence. "You want another kiss?"

"Yes!" Draco leaned up to steal one, but Harry pushed him down. "I want a proper congratulations, *boyfriend*. And fuck Quidditch..."

"They're going to know what we're doing. God, if it hadn't been *weeks*-"

"Please," Draco said contemptuously. "You couldn't keep your hands to yourself even when we'd been snogging every day. You just can't help yourself when it comes to me, can you?" *No matter how many people I murder in the interim.*

"No," Harry gasped, "I can't," and climbed onto the bed and kissed Draco with all his might. Draco tried to cup Harry's face to pull him deeper into the kiss, but Harry was already pressing him down, too intense to hold onto. Draco's arms fell above his head. Harry's lips parted from his, staring at his wrists with a spark of fascination.

"It's like I cast Manibipiscatus," Harry said, voice thick with want, and Draco laughed.

"You're the one with the wand," he drawled. The talon wand was still in Draco's discarded slacks, which left him essentially helpless. "You can do whatever you want to me, can't you?"

Harry kissed Draco until he had to turn his head aside for breath. Harry's mouth slid over Draco's neck, and Draco shivered, inconvenient heat sparking all through him. "You say that," Harry panted, "Like you want me to cast it on you."

"*You* like it," Draco whispered, arching his neck to give better access, and knew with dizzying certainty Harry would leave bruises. And he didn't have to lie about them. He didn't even have to spell them away. It would be something, when they couldn't see each other after this, to pull down his collar, look in the mirror, and see Harry's marks. "You like using it on me."

"I don't know why," Harry breathed, "It's really messed up," and Draco shook his head.

"I'm not the kind of person, Harry," Draco said with put-on nonchalance, "Who's very interested in letting other people tell me what's okay or messed up to like. If you like it, I want you to *do* it to me."

Harry took his wand and stroked it up Draco's arms, leaving a trail of magic before the tip touched Draco's wrists. "Manibipiscatus," he whispered. It paralyzed Draco's wrists, but left the rest of him all the more sensitive. "There. I've got you, baby. Not getting away." He tensed when Draco made a face. "Oh, no, were you joking? Did you- did you not really want me to do it?"

"No, it's 'baby'. Baby is so generic," Draco complained. "I get it's like, cute, but 'baby' could be anyone. Call me something just for *me*."

Harry's face relaxed into pure fondness. "Okay, then, who is it who I've caught?" he said playfully, stroking Draco's wrists and rubbing at the pulse point with his thumb. "Is just 'dragon' alright? You *are* such a dragon..."

"Alright. What are you going to do now that you've caught me, dragonslayer?"

"Don't *you* call *me* that, though," Harry breathed.

"Why, because it's stupid?" Draco laughed, and Harry nodded. "Or because you like it?" More abashedly, Harry nodded again. "What, would you prefer 'dragontamer'?"

Harry gave him a rough open-mouthed kiss, tugging Draco's lower lip back before he let it go. "*Charlie's* the dragontamer. You'd rather be in *his* bed?"

Draco rolled his eyes, fully in his element. The caught feeling of his wrists was delicious, a security Harry wanted him and wasn't going to let him go. "I'm not thinking of Charlie when I say that. Do you not think *you've*... mmm..." His back arched, as Harry nuzzled possessively at the sting of bite marks lingering on his neck, blood brought to the skin. "You've also tamed a dragon?"

"You said," Harry whispered. "The last time we were alone... you said you wanted me to..."

"I meant it," Draco whispered, and rubbed his hips up. He felt the answering proof of interest. "Anytime. Now, if you like."

When Draco rubbed against Harry again, the noise Harry made was inhuman. Draco let out a similar whine, stabbing heat in his gut almost more like pain. "You make me want..."

"Go on, then, congratulate me. What do you think twelve OWLs deserves?"

Harry's hand slid over Draco's hips. "Draco?" Harry said softly, sitting back with a scared but determined Gryffindor look on his uncertain face, glasses still on. "Can I... can I touch you?"

"You want to see all of me?" Draco laughed.

"Yes," Harry breathed. "Please."

Draco squirmed beneath Harry like a snake. He kicked off his trousers and trunks in one smooth motion, with Harry still clothed from head to toe, trainers even on. Harry sat back, jaw dropping as he stared at Draco, naked below him for the very first time. Draco fought his own sense of vulnerability. "Give me my wand," he ordered, and Harry didn't hesitate, fishing in the pockets of Draco's discarded slacks.

Except he got the wrong one. "No, *my* wand," he said, and Harry had to get out the moonstone dagger and several different potion vials before he found the talon wand. "Colloportus. Inmotus. Tumultum adux. How attached were you to the idea of playing Quidditch?"

"Not. Not attached. Why do you have two wands?" Harry asked, only for his gaze to cloud with admiration as it focused on Draco's body. His hand stroked through Draco's hair, pushing it out of his face. Draco looked up through the veil of stray light strands to smirk.

"Just in case." Draco didn't want to think why he carried his mother's wand all the time. "Is *that* what you find interesting about this... situation?" He gave Harry a heavier look through his eyelashes, spreading his legs. Harry's eyes snapped between them, finding Draco aroused and dripping. His hand brushed the inside of Draco's thighs. "Do you want to touch me there?"

"You're so, so, *so* beautiful," Harry said breathlessly. He pushed up his glasses, then ran his hand up, until his fingertips finally brushed the base of Draco's cock. His eyes lit up at the whimper that drew out of Draco. "Do you like that?"

"Yes," Draco groaned, "Don't tease me, *Harry*," and Harry stroked his fingertips all the way up, lingering on the head to stroke along the ridge with the utmost of care. He even touched *there* with reverence, like Draco was more precious than the moonstones on the dagger beside them.

"Just touch me the way you'd touch yourself. Here, put your fingers in my mouth," Draco ordered, and Harry obeyed. He could taste the saltiness of his own arousal as he sucked Harry's index and middle finger in, hollowing his cheeks before letting them out with a wet pop. By the time Draco was done getting Harry's hand wet, he could see Harry straining at his jeans.

"Now put your hand on me, Harry," he sighed, and gave Harry a long kiss that drove away the last bits of sour salty taste. Then he had Harry's wet hand on him, clumsy but eager, as Harry touched someone else there for the first time.

"Slower," Draco ordered. Harry sat up to watch Draco's pale member disappear under his palm as he stroked it. "You're nervous, don't rush..."

"Aren't *you* nervous?" Harry groaned, and with an arch of his ankle, Draco turned his foot and dragged it across the front of Harry's trousers.

"Nervous," Draco purred, "Is not the word I would... mmm... have in mind..."

Harry's free hand grabbed Draco's ankle, grip deliciously tight. "You're all I ever think about," he said hoarsely. "You're *perfect*. I think of you every night..."

"And now you've got me. I couldn't get away from you if I tried." He tried to lift his enchanted wrists in demonstration. "You can touch me anywhere you want-" And then he lost the ability to speak as Harry's fingers rubbed over his chest, pinching until his nipples were stiff.

Then Harry's fingers traced the ridges of his ribs, down the individual hollows of his abdomen, and outlining his hipbones with a soft stroke of fingernails, before his hand teased over Draco again. Draco bucked his hips up, trying to force them against Harry's hand. Harry's other hand went to Draco's hips and flattened there, thumb fit in the hipbone. The realization took Draco's breath: *He's holding my hips down so* he *can control how he touches me.*

"Touch me, please," Draco begged. When he shook and tried to grind against Harry's palm, the grip on his hip pinned him harder. "Harry," he groaned, tossing his head back, wanting Harry's mouth back on his neck. He wanted Harry all over him. "I'm not... ah, bordel de merde, not going to, ah, last much longer..."

There were broomstick calluses on Harry's fingers, whole hand rougher than Draco's. The friction of that coarse palm was unbelievable. Harry looked transfixed too by Draco's pale body trapped beneath his tanner one, whispering Draco's name every few strokes as if to assure himself this was real. "Look at you," Harry said with an impulsive kiss, "You're the most beautiful thing in the *world*, Draco, my dragon... mine..."

Draco strained against the pinned weight of his wrists to drag Harry into another kiss by teeth as the heat built in his stomach and pulsed between his legs, as Harry built the sensation thicker and thicker until at last it was stabbing, left foot rising and spasming, kicking into the wall of its own volition while his right dug into the sheets. His back arched as he came, seed dripping into Harry's palm as his lower half melted, thrumming to the rhythm of Harry's touch as that palm kept moving, prolonging the crest of the orgasm until it felt like Harry had milked him dry.

Draco let out a muffled cry, a grunt and then groan as his body dropped fully to the bed, feeling in his legs gone almost numb. Even once his body was his own, he felt aftershocks at every nerve, most of all at the tip, where Harry's fingers were touching.

"Evanesco," Harry whispered, and wandlessly Vanished the evidence. Harry's effortless thrum of his magic close by was enough to make Draco's toes curl again, another aftershock. "Was that... um, was that okay?" Harry asked, and Draco started to laugh.

"Are you kidding? *Harry*," he sighed, and struggled to sit up. "Let me have my hands back, and I'll show you if it was okay."

Harry didn't seem to know whether to take that as a threat, but he cast Finite incantatem anyway. He looked fearful when Draco rolled them over, but he returned Draco's kiss. His hips squirmed, trapped arousal rubbing against Draco's softening one. Draco's hands and mouth both tingled at the thought of getting on Harry.

He sat back and pulled Harry out, noting with a thrill the effort it took, to fit all of the heft in his hand. It would fill his mouth up so well...

He hadn't decided which he would use, hands or mouth, before just that touch had Harry coming between them. He cried out, dripping into Draco's palm, and Draco smirked.

It didn't matter it was quick. It was still a feeling to savor, the pulsing of Harry growing bigger and exploding in his hand. It was because of *Draco's* touch, reassuring every insecure bone in his body with the thought that this *part* of Harry indisputably belonged to Draco now.

"Harry," Draco whispered, leaning to press a soothing kiss to his cheek. "That's it, come for me..."

Once Harry finally stilled, Draco Vanished away his seed, before dropping to lie beside him. He stared greedily, feasting on the sight of Harry disheveled and sweaty.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what happened- I'm so embarrassed-"

Draco pulled Harry to lie beside him, and felt another perfect aftershock as Harry's hand perched on his waist, stroking the curve of his hip. "Oh, don't worry, Harry," he drawled, "It's flattering. I should have expected this from a Gryffindor," before leaning in to say the words he meant to soothe the blow to Harry's pride and then some: "We'll just have to spend a lot of time practicing so you can get better at it."

They managed to get dressed in time for dinner. The twins showed up to eat, and looked very amused at Luna's whispers about the couple of the moment skipping Quidditch. "Oh, but Harry, you love Quidditch!" Fred exclaimed in faux-innocent wonder. "What could possibly have been more... tempting?"

"Shut up," Harry hissed, looking nervously towards the adults, but none seemed to hear. They were all listening politely to Mr. Lovegood's story about the piece he was working on, involving the spread of Horklumps into indoor gardens. Soon, Hermione was left impatiently explaining to Ron what a Horklump was, while with an abashed glow of pride, Harry told George about Draco's habit of calling him a Horklump. Meanwhile, Luna was listening to her father with a fond light in her eye. Draco followed her gaze to those rapidly gesturing hands, passionate when he got worked up like this-

Then Draco's eyes dropped behind them to a glint of gold. It was a pendant Mr. Lovegood was wearing over his robes, a pendant that Draco had seen before. A *symbol* he had seen before, and not just on Mr. Lovegood.

"Luna," Draco whispered, pulling her aside after dinner. She beamed, squeezing his arm. She seemed ready for merriment, while he suddenly felt a hundred years old, and a hundred kilometers away from anyone's touch. "Listen, the necklace your father's wearing..."

"Oh, I suppose it's nice, but I like mine better," she said, and showed off the Sleeping Beauty turquoise pendant he had made her.

He'd used it to find her in the Malfoy cellars, after one of his fellow Slytherins had blinded him. But that was not the memory from the cellars he had before him. He knew where he had seen that symbol: on the Mirror of Erised, copied in his notebook so he would never forget. And not just *that* mirror.

It came to him like a brand on the air, the afterimage of the symbol repeated between reversed words, over Harry's defiant face that stood in for his reflection. It had appeared between the words on the Mirror of Ecidyrue, over his own face at eighteen, bitter and gaunt from Azkaban, and stumbling drunk.

"No, I'm just wondering if you know what that symbol is."

She smiled as if he was being silly. "That's the symbol of the Deathly Hallows, of course."

Fairytales

Chapter Notes

Playlist

It hadn't been hard to predict Sirius's response to the question of which Hallow he would want. "I'd pick the Elder Wand," he said confidently. "Unable to lose any duel? Count me in."

He said it as if the Elder Wand wasn't real. Draco hadn't believed it was, until at a recess in his trial, when his mother had told him he had once been the owner of it. At least according to what Harry had yelled in front of a half a hundred people. First, Dumbledore had owned it. Then Voldemort had wielded it. Draco had recognized that wand of Dumbledore's in Voldemort's hand, before the end... But Dumbledore would be the one to have it now, before Draco disarmed it from him-

Draco had seen the talon wand turn into the Elder Wand once. And perhaps in a few half-remembered dreams, although he'd surely only been imagining-

That had been in another world.

But if the Elder Wand had been real- the real deal, connected to other Hallows that really existed- if it was not just the only real Hallow, or just a very powerful wand that used the legend's name to give itself mystique- if the Hallows were connected to *mirrors*-

The Elder Wand was real. Dumbledore had it- though for how much longer-

"Sirius," Remus said softly, "How could you pick anything but the Resurrection Stone?"

After losing James and Lily, it would seem a betrayal to pick anything else. Draco suspected Harry would want the Resurrection Stone for that reason, and probably Severus as well. Though Draco doubted that Severus would ever admit to anyone what Lily Potter had meant to him, or what he would likely do to have her back. Even in the legend, resurrection was not a simple prospect.

Sirius took on a look of incredible guilt before Hermione cut in to save him. "According to the legend we read, with what happened to Cadmus, the Resurrection Stone doesn't work, at least not the way it should. If the person you brought back didn't *want* to come back- if *anyone* actually would... no, I would choose the cloak."

"You and James did get a lot of pranks done with yours," Remus prodded Sirius, looking to try and make the ruefulness leave Sirius's eyes. Sirius just stared at the circle-ringed part of Draco's massive cork board dedicated to the Resurrection Stone. "Not to mention hiding from death..."

"The *Dark Lord* wants to hide from death," Draco said contemptuously, pushing the velvet curtain back from the cloak section and eyeing it without respect. "No, none of it's any good, is it? Death didn't give any of these things to *help* them, only to bring their death sooner, that's the legend. But if they *were* real, lots of people would want them anyway, wouldn't they? There's the part about all three making you the Master of Death... *that* would interest the Dark Lord..."

"I can't believe you've let him get obsessed with this, Hermione," Sirius groaned, while Remus inspected the ripped-out page in the Elder Wand section, beside his drawings of the Mirror of Erised, and the ripped-out pages about the Mirror of Ecidyrue that it didn't seem anyone could see but him. *Why are there blank pages up?* Sirius had asked. *What are you going to write on them?*

"This is all just a fairytale," Sirius was saying now, as oblivious to this truth as the other. "Everyone knows the Deathly Hallows aren't real..."

"The Mirror of Erised is real," Remus said softly, touching Draco's arm reassuringly. "That's no pipe dream. And if Draco is right that there's a connection with the Elder Wand..."

Sirius scoffed, looking nervously again at the section about the Resurrection Stone, before taking the curtains and drawing them closed. "Admit it," he said, "You're just interested because this was the sign of Grindelwald, aren't you?" He gestured to the letter that Draco had gotten back from Viktor Krum about his time at Durmstrang, detailing Grindelwald's connection to the symbol of the Deathly Hallows there. Draco took that as his sign he had shown his new guardians more than enough. Sirius seemed unusually pensive as he waited for Draco to cast his habitual locking and concealing charms around this new section of his room. "Those Slytherins did more ill than they knew giving you that nickname. Planning to take it as your own?"

"I think the mystery behind my wand might be tied up in all this," Draco explained, "Since the symbols that appeared on the Mirror of Erised did for my wand, but not for Ron's."

Hermione looked as unimpressed by his chosen lie to explain his interest as ever. "I've been trying to find a kind way to put this," she said with a sigh, following them down the stairs. "And I agree that maybe we should try to find the Mirror of Erised, to see if the symbol of the Deathly Hallows appears again." A letter to Ron had verified that yes, he remembered symbols appearing all those years ago, but no, he didn't remember exactly what it had looked like, though it could have been the one Draco had drawn. "But Draco, are you sure it wasn't just that, well... you and Ron..."

"What she means to say," Sirius said bluntly, "Is that it probably worked for you and not Ron because you're loads more powerful. Or dark. That too."

Meaning that Draco could produce snakes to choke the life out of you for the fun of it, while Ron was sometimes hard-pressed to produce his own *name* if a pretty girl was talking to him.

"Albus Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald," Remus said thoughtfully.

It made Draco annoyed they had to go to the Grangers, now that they were getting somewhere, and more annoyed it would be months on months before the papers would start publishing *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore,* which exposed just how close Dumbledore and Grindelwald had been. There was multiple kinds of *defeating* going on there, if you read between the lines.

"There *is* a connection," Remus mused, "Between Dumbledore and Grindelwald. And we don't know the origins of the Mirror of Erised, or how Albus got it. Grindelwald could have been the one to make the mirror, though I would think it older than that- or just alter it and put his sign there... Dumbledore could have taken it when he defeated him..."

They had to stop speaking of such things once they walked out into the Muggle world, a short walk to the tube to Hampstead. Hermione entertained Sirius and Remus with stories of Draco's first ever tube ride to Islington, when he had called it 'the death tunnel' and compared it unfavorably to the Chamber of Secrets.

It was a short walk from the station to Hermione's house. The streets weren't as crowded here, but the others were still resistant to letting Draco press Remus on the Grindelwald question.

"We can talk about it when we get back," Remus urged.

Draco sulked at him. "You won't be in the mood anymore to talk about dark magic." It was singularly frustrating, that the best resource he had for these questions, his former Defense professor, was also the most reticent.

I'm already a dark wizard, poor beleaguered guardian of mine. You met me far, far too late to avert that. All you can really contribute now is keeping me from getting myself offed by my own incompetence.

They put on their most normal faces at the Granger house. "You only ever get one chance to make a first impression," Remus kept urging Sirius. At least they didn't turn many heads in their Muggle attire, save for Draco and Sirius as two long-haired men, and, Draco liked to think, as singularly good-looking ones.

The Grangers opened the door at once, exclaiming how excited they were to finally meet these uncles Draco talked so much about. They gave not just Hermione and Draco welcoming hugs, but Sirius and Remus too. Remus looked overwhelmed, but Sirius was gregarious as ever, returning their enthusiasm in his old Def Leppard shirt and leather jacket. When Mrs. Granger remarked that Draco hadn't told them how handsome his uncles were, her gaze lingered on Sirius.

They got a Sunday roast, lamb for the occasion and a good cut at that, for meeting Sirius and Remus. It had nothing on the rosemary lamb at the Manor, but it was such an improvement on Kreacher's resentful cooking, Mrs. Granger found her guests all asking for seconds, and in Sirius's case, thirds and fourths. If she'd been expecting to have leftovers, she'd been sorely mistaken.

Compliments of the lamb, and Mr. Granger's contribution of potatoes au gratin, alternated with an unexpectedly awkward getting-to-know-you between the two couples, while Draco

smirked across the table at Hermione and made no attempt to ease the situation. Hermione was left embarrassed, perhaps for both sets of adults. She looked to regret bringing them together, though she'd had little choice if she wanted her parents to let her keep staying at Grimmauld until Harry got there.

The conversation started well, with Sirius enthusing about his godson Harry and the soon-to-be approved adoption in store. The Grangers cooed in excitement at the discovery that Draco had found himself a boyfriend, and were gracious not enough to mention the strangeness of that boyfriend being Draco's soon-to-be adopted brother. But things got strained when Sirius got too big for his britches, boasting that Draco was not only romantically but magically accomplished.

"We heard he got *twelve* of those owl things," Mr. Granger said, prompting a sour look from Hermione, but Sirius shook his head.

"Oh, that doesn't matter so much, academics and all that," Sirius said breezily, to Hermione's look of horror. "*Book* learning. No offense, Remus," he added to his husband the professor, who had taught the students at the table. "But what really counts is what you can *do* with your magic. Draco's been giving Hermione dueling lessons, you know-"

"Sirius!" Hermione yelped.

This disclosure prompted not the admiration Sirius must have expected, but a round of concern from the Grangers. They'd had little idea what wizard dueling entailed, and looked hardly comforted by more information. From what Hermione said about Muggle child safety laws, it hardly seemed in accordance to let Draco shoot blood tornados at their daughter.

"Don't worry, Draco and I have practice duels every other day, I'm training him up well," Sirius said nonchalantly, not reading the room. Remus was giving him a look like he'd be sleeping in a guest room tonight. "He learns from me, and she learns from him. I don't know what they do in there, but I'm sure Draco does a good job, they were in this secret association last year for it. The last fight we had, Draco managed to beat me. He's gotten a lot better. He's got these wicked fireballs he throws- though *I'm* the one who taught him his best shielding against curses, especially dark magic-"

"So, Hermione tells us you're dentists," Remus interrupted. "Those are tooth doctors, no?"

The traumatized-looking Grangers were given a respite, explaining their occupation to the wizards, only for them to come up against another stumbling block: Sirius and Remus's occupations. "So Draco told us you're a teacher," Mr. Granger said in a clear attempt at friendliness to Remus, now patently the less objectionable of the two. "You taught at Hogwarts? What did you teach?"

Remus was left explaining DADA, which went alright until they asked what a lesson would be like. Remus fabricated an imaginary lesson that sounded more like Umbridge's, all book reading and theory, when his actual classes had involved dangerous dark creatures, the first of which had given Draco a full mental breakdown. Draco mentally applauded the discretion, only to see Remus too blanch when the Grangers asked why he had stopped teaching at Hogwarts.

"It was just because he was supporting me, it wasn't that he did anything wrong," Sirius said protectively, putting an arm around Remus's shoulders, and the Grangers misinterpreted.

"Were you fired because you're in a gay couple? That's terrible," Mr. Granger said heatedly. "My brother Gary, he's also married to a man, he's run into some issues with job discrimination..."

"Oh, no, it's just because I was a criminal and he helped me abscond from the law," Sirius said, and blinked at the Grangers' pole-smacked bug eyes. "Oh, Striker, you didn't tell your parents about me? Wow, that's rare, someone who hasn't heard about all that. See, I was innocent. There was a retrial last year. Your daughter was instrumental in my defense, she was amazing, you should be proud..."

Hermione buried her head in her hands, clearly having told her parents nothing about either Sirius's past or her role in the notorious trial. The Grangers seemed to be making their most valiant effort not to freak out. "What were you accused of?" Mrs. Granger asked politely, looking like the charm of Sirius's prepossessing appearance had definitively worn off.

"Oh, some murders and that. But it wasn't me, it was our old schoolfriend, he framed me, before he fled as a rat, hard for anyone to catch, until... anyway, that's beyond the point! Which is that association with me lost Remus his job at Hogwarts, back when I was a fugitive on the run."

There was stunned silence before Mrs. Granger rallied. "Where do you teach now, Remus?"

"Oh, I'm, ah, between jobs," Remus said, flushing.

Sirius leapt to Remus's defense. "He's too busy," he said loyally, "Helping me with my castle," and Hermione and Draco did a double take along with the Grangers.

"The Citadelle Xaphan? Is there where you two go during the day? You've been going *back* there?" Hermione gasped, seeming to flash to the aftermath of the wedding.

"Dumbledore's request, it's a project. Don't make that face, Draco, we were going to tell you, we only just got it... anyway, he wants us to fit back out the citadel as a fortress. Keep *my* family out for sure, then rebuilding, anti-Dementor warding too... always good to have a citadel in your back pocket, when you're in a..." Sirius caught Remus's glare. "In a... er... yes. Well, just always good to have a citadel to spare, you know?"

"Wait," Mrs. Granger said, "You own a *castle*?" Her gaze went to Remus, as if understanding now why Sirius's husband didn't have to work.

"A very run-down one," Sirius said, as if that would make it any less strange to Muggles.

Hermione changed the subject clumsily to films, stressing how she and Draco had been going to the movies together, in between Muggle bookstores and the nail salon. Those were the only fleeting pieces of normalcy she could muster.

So far, in between duels and research, they had seen a film called Independence Day about aliens invading the Earth, with a pleasing quantity of explosions, and an animated musical called The Hunchback of Notre Dame. The Grangers decided that Draco was a Disney devotee in the making. They insisted he stay and watch one of Hermione's old favorite Disney films with them. As much as Sirius and Remus seemed to disconcert them, they always seemed happy for a bonding opportunity with Draco.

Sirius and Remus had to join them, and looked fascinated by the conceit of the American business Disney, which produced moving pictures based on old stories and fairytales. Hermione insisted, red-faced, that she had only liked Disney when she was very young.

"You wanted to be a Disney princess, sweetheart," Mrs. Granger reminisced fondly, "Don't lie, you dressed up as Belle for three straight years for Halloween," and Hermione hotly protested.

"Obviously I was *never* unaware," she said primly, "Of the unfortunate social implications of the heteronormative storytelling structures... I'm a feminist, of course, and aware these need to be viewed through a *very* critical lens..."

They went to the living room, where Draco had seen his first ever Muggle film of Frankenstein, and ended up watching the first Disney animated feature, Snow White. Draco's ears perked up when he heard it was based off a German fairytale. When it proved to involve an enchanted looking glass, Hermione had to give him a warning look, knowing his excitement would be excessive for a mere drawing of an enchanted mirror.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" the evil queen asked the mirror ritualistically, and the mirror answered, *Snow White.* Or essentially, *Not you, bitch.*

"I suppose it must seem terribly regressive to you, this representation of witches," Mr. Granger said, in an attempt at sensitivity, and Sirius shook his head.

"Oh, no, plenty of our mirrors talk, though they're usually more critical," he told them. "Our mirror tends to like me. But just this morning, it told Remus that he desperately needed to look into a new set of robes. I was in agreement..."

Luckily there was the movie to distract them. Draco could hardly enjoy Sirius horrifying the Grangers, given how transfixed he was even by an animated mirror. Then he was drawn in by the character of the evil queen, with whom, frankly, he could empathize more than any of the other characters. "She is so cool," Draco sighed, starry-eyed, as she delivered the poison apple.

"First you decide you like the evil official more than the Hunchback or anyone else in that movie," Hermione sighed affectionately. "And now you like the evil queen? You're not supposed to, Draco! That's why she doesn't have a proper name and she's just called 'the evil queen'..."

"That's so discriminatory," Draco said haughtily. "The queen is the only personage of quality in the entire narrative." There was something in her manner that reminded him of Severus.

He didn't know what he had expected. For the mirror to light up with the Deathly Hallows symbol, or the evil queen to start discoursing on the merits of the misunderstood Grindelwald? But he was still disappointed when the movie ended with a so-called happy ending, the faceless boring prince delivering true love's kiss to Snow White, apparently claiming her.

"I see what you mean about regressive gender politics," Draco commented, smirking at Hermione's dreamy look regardless, while even Remus seemed unaware now how much he was continually traumatizing the Grangers. He'd entered a serious discussion with Sirius about what poisons and curses could realistically be involved in the 'poison apple healed by a kiss' scenario.

"This does have the feel of a story that could have been written based on the real magical world," Remus was saying earnestly. "Talking mirrors, dwarves, poison apples with the Draught of Living Death, even love-based enchantments, those are all obviously real. It's only a question of whether there was some kind of separate magic *to* Snow White, or the true love exception was inherent in the original variant of the draught..."

The Grangers seemed relieved they didn't linger long.

"I think that went well," Remus said as they left. Hermione got a pained look but didn't correct him.

It was only as she was saying goodnight that Hermione asked Draco two questions, which must have been in her mind for hours. "Which one of the Deathly Hallows would *you* want?" she asked, lingering at his door.

"If it worked," Draco said without hesitation, "The Resurrection Stone."

Hermione got an infinitely pitying look. "For Mr. Nott?"

Draco's blood went cold. He'd been thinking of people who hadn't died yet, in the red line. "No," Draco said stiltedly, "He's a Death Eater, if I brought him back he'd- no, Hermione, I just meant... if we do lose people we care about, that's what I'd want, to know I could bring them back. Or at least- you know, talk to them again." He imagined having Severus to consult even after losing him, and felt a mix of wonder and regret that only worsened when Hermione asked her other question.

"Can I ask too... what did you see in the Mirror of Erised?"

He hesitated, not answering, and she looked knowing. "Ron told me about what happened in first year, how you tried to destroy it. Did you not like what it turned out you most wanted?"

"You've already guessed, haven't you," Draco said wearily, and she smiled.

She had guessed his Boggart as well. It shouldn't surprise him.

"Did you like Harry even back then?"

Rather than denying, he went on the attack. "If it was a *person* the mirror showed you... who would *you* see in the mirror, Striker?"

Her cheeks went pink, but she drew herself up stiffly. "There's no telling," she said primly, and sent him as well as herself straight to bed.

"I have something to tell you," were Harry's first words to Draco and Hermione upon Portkey arrival, before either could even get out so much as a Happy Birthday. "I've already told Ron and Luna. I was going to the last time you were at the Burrow, but I got... er, distracted..."

The disclosure of the prophecy's real contents cast a pall over the occasion, though Draco had hardly been surprised to hear 'neither may live while the other survives'. *I just want to know how the Elder Wand plays into that killing.* "Okay, yeah, one of you will have to kill the other," Draco said with a shrug, "Stands to reason."

"Doesn't it frighten you that it's all on Harry's shoulders?" Hermione whispered wide-eyed.

Draco put an arm around those shoulders, a singularly pleasant experience. After a couple of weeks of being properly fed and daily Quidditch matches, and Luna, Harry was looking more tan and muscular than Draco could remember even in the red line. But it was hard to imagine how Harry could look any better than at that moment, sat on the grass with that look on his face like it was his *fault* he was the Chosen One.

"No, it doesn't worry me," Draco answered, "Because I *know* Harry's going to be the one to triumph. What?" he laughed, when even Luna gave an admonishing look at his excessive confidence.

"Why?" Luna said cautiously. "Because *you're* on his side, you mean?"

For once, it wasn't postulates of his own excessive ego he was consulting. "Harry told me that himself, actually, you know. Back in *first* year."

After a baffled silence, Ron startled them all with a laugh. "Oh, right! See, Ginny, Luna, we found out You-Know-Who might not really be dead, and Draco said Harry had been slacking on the job! I'll never forget how angry Harry got. He was hopping mad, saying that if You-Know-Who wasn't dead, he'd just kill him again."

Ginny frowned. "That doesn't sound like you, Harry."

"It does when he's trying to impress Draco," Luna said placidly. "Oh, Harry, do try and kill You-Know-Who. I think it would impress Draco very much."

The rest of the birthday party unfolded without a hitch, with Harry declaring himself more than ready for his test on the morrow. Draco was the one who came up wanting, leaving the Burrow despite all the Order heads to pick none the wiser about Dantanian or the Hallows or anything mystic and fascinating like that. To the adults, the Hallows were a myth, even the Elder Wand, and Draco was wasting time chasing pipe dreams, when they had people

actually dying. When he tried to ask after Grindelwald, the response was the same, with tagalong Diggory giving Draco a bleak look before Tonks corralled him back to civility- *can we worry about the dark lord* actually *at large right now?* The only dark wizard's symbol in play now was the Dark Mark- and, potentially, though no one said it aloud, the talon brand.

Neville's absence was notable, though ostensibly attributed to working 24/7, helping Frank and Alice prepare for re-taking their Auror exams. Luna pulled Draco aside just before he left, on the pretext of 'secret cousin business'. "Does my favorite cousin miss me too much?" Draco teased, pretending to be pleased. But Draco wished this had been full Rat Thieves business. Hermione had to be better-qualified to advise Luna on such a subject.

As little as Hermione wanted Draco's romantic input, there was someone who did. "I'm worried about things with Neville," Luna began abruptly, and launched into a tale of sizable woe that seemed improbable for a largely epistolary relation. From what he could gather, the trouble stemmed from a bit of poetry.

"You sent him a poem?" Draco boggled. "A real, serious love poem?"

Luna blinked at him. "I feel quite foolish about it now. He didn't write one back or anything. All he said was that it was pretty. Pretty! Oh, Frankenstein, I don't think he likes me anymore!"

Draco pushed aside his rationality for loyalty. "He should be thanking his lucky stars to get a poem from COUSIN!"

"He probably thinks I'm loony now," Luna muttered, wringing her hands together. "I'm too weird to have a boyfriend."

"You are not! Luna, I 100% guarantee you that Neville is just shite at writing letters."

Luna looked an adorable combination of abashed and still oblivious. "Should I not send him any more poems?"

"Send him all the poems you want!" Draco exclaimed, and this was why Hermione should have been the one consulted. "If he's ungrateful, I'll castrate the whiny bitch!"

He had been hoping to see that impish little smile, and so it appeared. "Please don't castrate Neville. I might have a vested interest in that subject someday... perhaps?"

Draco gasped theatrically. "Luna! You dirty little cousin, you may not!"

"Neville would never," she sighed, smile faltering. "I don't even think he really likes me that way. I'm not sexy like that. Not like you-"

"Neville," Draco said, steadfast in his loyalty to both in this, "Is just ineloquent. The fault is mine. I've excessively raised your expectations for a male correspondent!"

"I'm coming on too strong, I think," Luna sighed, "And that's just in writing. How will it be when we can actually see each other-"

"I think you're reading his letters wrong. He's probably just shy and lacking confidence. It's Neville-"

"But he takes so long to write me back letters! And they're so short and dull!"

Remus poked his head around, slow and respectful, reminding Draco they were meant to be going, and Draco enfolded Luna in a tight, protective hug. "Luna," Draco whispered firmly, "If he behaves like that in person, then worry. But my favorite cousin is far too brilliant to base the assessment of her future chances of happiness on the literary abilities of Neville Longbottom."

Draco drifted off that night with a smile, at the thought of poor Luna pining over verbally limited Neville. Draco himself, after all, must really must have written her too florid and verbose letters in comparison. But as he drifted off, happy to think of Luna rather than Harry's test tomorrow, a thought crossed his mind that made that subject no safe haven either.

Maybe it wasn't Draco who'd raised her expectations too much, for a boy's writing to her, words of affection in ink over a filling page, words that promised an end to loneliness. Maybe the one to do that had been Tom Riddle.

There might always be limits to how much the past could ever be overwritten. When it came to a past like theirs.

The past for another, though, could perhaps be overwritten the following morning. After Hermione bid them goodbye, promising to be a frequent visitor, the three Blacks were forced to feign casualness, hanging about the living room pretending to read like they weren't dying of suspense, knowing Harry's test was going on right now at the Burrow. But finally, near noon, Sirius was summoned to speak to Harry by his mirror, and Draco could only presume that meant answers, as to whether Draco really had changed the past enough to- as Draco had offered back in third year- in the end, give Harry that real family he had promised him after all.

Remus lingered in the living room after, nobly resisting the urge to eavesdrop, but Draco had no such compunctions whatsoever. He went straight up once the door to Remus and Sirius's room had closed, pressing his ear up to the hard wood. He could only make out the muffled notes of Sirius's enthused baritone. "Damn it," he breathed, "He must not be the near the door."

Remus had followed despite his better angels, and looked singularly ashamed of himself as a guardian and role model as he whispered, "Can you make anything out?" It surely wouldn't be long before Sirius emerged with news for them, and yet neither of them could wait a second longer than necessary to know the results.

Draco considered. "I'll be right back. You listen in case Sirius gets loud."

Remus looked ready to die of embarrassment, but pressed his ear to the door regardless as Draco sprinted up the stairs. He looked dubious once Draco returned from his room with two

sets of Extendable Ears. "What are those? Those are from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, aren't they?"

"What do they look like?" Draco said happily, "Eavesdropping ears," and handed Remus one before putting his into use.

"Draco," Remus said dryly, "You've never used these devices to listen in on the Order, have you?"

"Of course not," Draco said brightly, "Ssh," and his heart leaped so strongly to his throat when he made out Harry's voice clearly, it was like he had just caught sight of Bellatrix Lestrange. But this was not terror but hope that filled up his chest and lungs, the full expectation of good news after a test they had all been treating as ceremonial. And now the moment had come- and if it *hadn't* gone as easily as they all expected from the cheerful boasts of Bill Weasley, perhaps overstated for the benefit of his simpering Veela fiancé-

"So Snape was there to test you too? It wasn't just Dumbledore?" Sirius was asking, and Draco knew from the worried face that Remus made that Remus was listening in too, even before he followed Remus's Extendable Ear to its position near his. A wave of giddy affection filled him for his once-professor, reduced to schoolboy tricks with him, when it came to someone they all loved as much as Harry Potter.

"Yes, and he was much harsher on me," Harry said, and Draco couldn't hear any real sadness or resentment in his voice. Surely there would be, if he had lost his chance at adoption, albeit hopefully temporarily... "He's a really strong Occlumens- no, Legilimens, I suppose that's the word, for the one who does the penet- I mean, the, the pushing into minds-" Draco stifled a nervous laugh, remembering his first Occlumency lesson with Harry, and Harry's innocent question about wanting to be the one doing the penetrating. Harry *had* to come live with them, he *had* to-

"He was just dying to make you fail, I'd bet," Sirius began heatedly, "Doesn't want to see us happy, doesn't want you near his godson-" But astonishingly, Sirius seemed to master himself, enough to take the heat from his voice and backtrack to a more mature, Remus-like stance. "That is, I used to think, but I'm sure he was fair now. He's a good godfather to Draco. He wouldn't sabotage Draco's family. That is- was he fair?"

"He must have already told him," Draco whispered to Remus, "And we missed it. Harry wouldn't keep Sirius in suspense like this." Remus nodded tensely, squeezing Draco's shoulder, a steadying touch. Draco tried to breathe.

"He was fair," Harry said. "When I did well, he admitted it. I didn't let him in my head at all-" *Thank God for that. The things Severus could have seen-* "And he admitted that to Dumbledore. Even *he* said he thought I was good enough at Occlumency that I wouldn't imperil the Order headquarters through my connection to Voldemort."

The name still made Draco's insides clench up a bit, but the furious rush of hope that swept up through him overwhelmed that queasiness, left him exchanging glances with Remus, almost believing- "I still can't believe it," Sirius marveled. "Dumbledore's actually going to let us. I never thought he would."

"Well, yes, he did, I swear," Harry said, voice coming out more soft and nervous. "I mean, that is, if you two still really want to-"

"Of course we do!" Sirius exclaimed, at last getting loud, as predicted. "Harry, we're going to adopt you! Today! We have all the papers ready, Muggle and magical! We'll get you from the Weasleys and take you to the Dursleys this afternoon!"

"Merlin," Remus breathed, voice as wondering and disbelieving as Harry's. "He did it. He passed."

Draco nodded, all jealousy long gone now that he was securely a Black himself. He felt tears at his eyelashes, so he tightly shut his eyes as he kept nodding, hands trembling it was that hard to hold back the surge of happiness then, all the feeling too much, too intense, almost like magic, because he had done it, he had changed this too. Even with what he had done to Theo- *don't think about that*- it was truly impossible now to say he hadn't done any good, coming back in time. He'd brought the Longbottoms back. And he'd saved Sirius's life, gotten him married, gotten his innocence proved, and now he had gotten Harry Potter his rightful family.

He remembered Harry's face that past New Year's Eve, watching Neville with the Longbottoms after Draco restored them. Harry hadn't argued, when Draco had said, this is what you saw in the Mirror of Erised, your heart's deepest desire, just for someone else. But this- if this still wasn't James and Lily Potter themselves, it was as close as you could get. "You're going to be such amazing parents," Draco said, voice thick and catching, eyes still shut. "You're going to take him from the Dursleys-" Draco remembered that nightmare of the cupboard, inside Harry's head, truly just a nightmare now. "You're going to love him the way he deserves."

Then Draco's eyes shot open, at the feeling of Remus's arms enfolding him, pulling him into a whole-hearted hug and not letting go. Draco pressed his face into Remus's shoulder gratefully, and listened to Remus's voice like the heavens-appointed narrator of a miracle as Remus hugged and hugged him, saying, "We're all going to be a family. The four of us."

All seemed well and good and set then, the only issue being the need to talk Sirius out of throwing a truly excessive party for the occasion. Draco ran off to get himself dressed up to see Harry, but it turned out, Remus had more to say to him first. Some small complications, to that idyllic picture of the perfect new adopted family.

"Draco? Can I come in?"

Draco came over from fussing over his hair in the mirror to open the door, with an hour still before they would be taking Dumbledore's Portkey to the Dursleys. The edge in Remus's voice left Draco expecting either an unexpected telling-off or news of someone important's murder. Depending on the person, he would prefer the second.

"Okay," Draco said, "But I need to be ready in time, if we've given the Dursleys a time-"

Remus looked surprised. "Draco, you're not coming," he said, as if it was self-evident, and gently pushed back all of Draco's arguments, one by one. He looked more sympathetic, when Draco protested that he should be there for Harry at a time like that, but countered that by saying he was sure Harry's prime concern was getting it over with at the Dursleys as quickly as possible.

It was true. There would be little time there for sentimental tours of the childhood home, which Draco had already taken part in, within Harry's head.

"You'll see him at home," Remus reassured him. "Which makes it your job to make sure everything is nice and welcoming for him. Maybe you can talk Kreacher into preparing a roast for dinner. Something of a celebration. Though," he cautioned, raising his hand, "Just the four of us for tonight, and nothing as grand as what Sirius has been saying."

"Okay," Draco agreed begrudgingly. It would, after all, take far longer to get the adoption papers signed, if Draco had Vernon Dursley put under the Cruciatus curse at the time. And there was, he found in himself, as little as he had liked doing it against his will to the Rowles and all of Voldemort's victims- a, well, non-zero possibility of that happening. If he and Vernon Dursley ended up in a room together, with the Trace on Harry already disabled now- there was no telling what Draco might do. Best not risk it, putting Draco in the way of such temptation, to hurt people who so badly deserved the hurting.

Draco went and got himself a glass of water from the bathroom, making himself drink it to calm the feeling of pure bloodlust, thrumming to the pitch of excitement of the talon wand. "So is that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Not all," Remus said slowly. "Draco, I'm going to ask you something... personal, but as your guardian, I do feel it is my place, as uncomfortable as it may be. Please, don't go into any detail, but- have you and Harry been intimate yet?"

Draco spat out a mouthful of water all over his carefully-picked outfit. He had to sit there sullenly letting Remus show off his exacting drying charm before he could answer the question. "Define intimate," he muttered, afraid to lie. It was bizarre how well Remus had gotten to know him at this point. Neither of his parents- *biological parents,* he should think- had been half as good at telling if he was lying, not after a whole lifetime.

"Like I said, I don't need details." Remus gave him a comforting pat on the back. "Nor am I here to criticize or condemn."

Draco had gotten into this inconvenient habit of being largely honest with Remus, if being asked something outright. "Okay, not details? Well, uh, probably less intimate than you fear, but more intimate than we should? It, uh, might have been helpful if you gave me this talk, like, a month ago?"

Remus stifled a soft laugh. "Draco, no need to be defensive. Believe me, I can relate to you. I'm sure Sirius has insinuated how... attached he and I were back in school, when we also lived together, beginning at a younger age than you..." Draco's look of curiosity forced Remus to admit, "Thirteen, alright?" Draco's eyebrows shot high up his forehead. "Not all the

way, but yes, we were snogging by third year. The rest came later, and honestly, I think the two of us should have waited longer than we did."

"But Sirius couldn't wait, right?" Draco laughed, and Remus shifted, embarrassed.

"He's always been an impatient person, yes," Remus sighed, "But it wasn't just him. Sometimes *I* was the one rushing us along. Hormones are hormones... But more than that, I was *passionate* about him. I loved him, and I thought nothing would ever change. It's hard when you're young to *want* to be careful. You can't see a reason to take your time, when you think you're meant for each other, and that you're always going to feel about each other the way you do right now-"

"You think Harry and I aren't going to end up together," Draco surmised, "And that if I rush into more with him physically once he moves in, I'll regret it."

"That's not what I'm saying," Remus said, and Draco leaned into his touch when he began to stroke his back. "I'm saying that intimacy itself can change things. You may think you're prepared for what it will be like. But when you have intense feelings for one another, the emotional part of it can be just as fraught as the physical, if not more. Young men don't think about the amount of vulnerability in the act... the sheer weight of personal investment of yourself..."

"I'm already in love with him," Draco groused. "How much worse can it get?"

Remus's eyebrow lifted at the word choice. "'Worse'?"

"I've always hated it," Draco sighed, "Feeling the way I do about him. I couldn't admit it to myself, and then I kept hoping for it to go away. I was in denial he liked me back, until the Second Task in the Triwizard tournament. And then I told myself I had to stay away, because I wasn't good enough for him. That didn't change, but..." Draco looked down. "I couldn't help it. And now..."

"Oh, little dragon, you *are* good enough for Harry," Remus said, voice full of conviction. "More than just being charming and clever, sweetheart, you *are* a good person. Yes, you have darkness as well as light in you, but everyone does. And you try so hard. I have never seen anyone try as hard as you do to keep your friends safe. Or try as hard to *change.* And coming from where you come from... from *what* you come from... oh, Draco," he sighed, and hugged him tightly as Draco sniffled. "If you want to be with Harry, you should. Just keep in mind that while you may have been involved for some months, but your relationship has changed. Not only as a family now, but officially as a couple. Give it some time like that before you rush any more. But I would advise you to... go *slow,* at least, in whatever explorations you make of each other. Enjoy each part, and become used to being his boyfriend, before you..."

"I know all the charms and stuff," Draco said sullenly, far sulkier than he would have been if he had not heard the ring of truth in Remus's words, and the answering sense of responsibility in himself. A sense he doubted Harry would share so strongly. But if he insisted they take their time, Harry would respect it. Even if Draco wished he wouldn't.

"You're ready magically," Remus said with a fond smile, "But Draco, be sure your *heart* is ready. The other thing I know you try very hard at is hiding how much you *care*, and very much so with Harry. But you can't stop caring just because you tell yourself to. And if you don't remain open with Harry about how you're feeling, in body *and* mind, I worry you'll get hurt. Sex is a larger commitment than you know. It's easier than you think, for two people to believe it means different things, and hurt each other without even meaning to..."

"I know," Draco said in a small voice, images going through his head of times with Theo- of that final awful time, and then of Mr. Nott's body, which always creeped in when he was doubting himself, or stuck in a pit full of things he didn't want to remember. "I've told Harry I love him. And I'll try to keep telling him that. Even if it makes me feel like a bloody Hufflepuff."

"So," Remus said finally. "Do Sirius and I need to worry, letting you and Harry move into such close bedrooms, all alone on your own floor?"

"No," Draco sighed. "Not- not *overly.* We'll go slow."

"Enjoy it," Remus advised. "You're only this young and innocent once. Enjoy everything fully, while it's still new. There's a joy in that too."

"Now you're telling me," Draco muttered. More memories of Theo were clogging him, as words came that he wished had somehow been put in his mother's mouth, so many years ago.

He'd sucked Theo's cock before he ever even kissed him.

When Remus asked Draco what he'd said, he told him it was nothing, and wished him luck at the Dursleys. Remus got a less pleasant look on his usually so-kind face. "Oh, I don't think we'll need it," he said calmly. "I don't think any of us have very much at all to say to those people." So he had some idea what it had been like there for Harry, at least. "Save for a few words I mean to put in the ear of Lily's sister."

Draco saw his guardians off, and then set at his appointed task. After whining and threatening some form of celebration dinner out of Kreacher, who took the news of Harry's adoption like Great-Aunt Walburga dying all over again, Draco found himself at the tapestry, tracing *Harry James Potter*, where he had put the name in anticipation of this. And now it was coming true.

Or he meant to trace it and moon over the mere name of his beloved, those deceptively short and simple five syllables, but someone had gotten there first. Severus stood there, uninvited and unannounced. If Kreacher had known of his presence, he was not likely to have played the part of butler. He was regarding the part of the tapestry where Harry and Draco fit with a rather darker look than Draco would have. Perhaps he was reflecting on the incidentally unavoidable exclusion of Lily Potter now from Harry's family tree.

It didn't matter how dark Severus's face was, or how much his tall column of stark black seemed to radiate menace and misery. It always had, and perhaps always would, but Draco loved him, and hadn't seen him since he had been screaming at Severus's retreating back of

his impending death. He had expected the worst, of Severus continuing to play the part of spy after Draco's actions at the Ministry. But here was his godfather, without even any glaringly visible signs of Cruciatus or the like, the same unpleasant figure as ever, and just as stiff and sour to be half-hugged, half-tackled by a childish, deliriously happy godson. "Severus! You're here! You're here! I missed you, Severus!"

"Kindly unhand me, burdensome godson," Severus said, using exactly the words Draco would have predicted as he gingerly pulled Draco off him, like picking away some noxious fungus from a stone. "I have witnessed enough Gryffindor effusion to last a lifetime this morning. I would ask you not to afflict me with any more."

"You were at Harry's test!" Draco said, arms waving incoherently in excitement. "I heard! You *passed* him!" And Draco knew how very much it must have cost Severus, not just in allowing such happiness for his old childhood bullies, but in handing over Lily Potter's only child to the guardianship of Sirius Black. But Severus had, and Draco had to try not to beam in pride for his godfather. "They're off getting Harry and finalizing things now. There's going to be a welcome dinner tonight." Draco cast aside all common sense and self-preservation. "You should come!"

Severus didn't bother dignifying that with a response. "Despite the delusions, it seems, of all those around me, the world does not yet still revolve around Potter. I am not here to speak to him or of him, Draco. I spoke to Dumbledore at some length this morning, after Potter's test, and I have news for you instead." There was an unusual awkwardness, then, to Severus, as he leaned against the side of the tapestry wall, deep dark eyes troubled. "I wished to tell you this in person."

There had to always be *some* poison in the apple. "My parents," Draco blurted. "My mother! Did something-"

"They live," Severus intoned. "I merely have something to impart you must know, before you begin your purchasing of supplies at Diagon Alley for the year." Draco opened his mouth to ask if he had been expelled- *reasonable*- and Severus silenced him with a glare. "You may find this news upsetting or gratifying, or simply inconsequential, I know not which. Whatever you find it, it will affect your purchasing of paraphernalia regardless. Surely you have reflected that your place in a dorm with Theodore Nott is an... uncomfortable one. Dumbledore's solution-"

"Is Theo a Death Eater now?" Draco blurted. "Has he taken the Dark Mark? Does he have a mission?"

Severus looked astonished. "If any of that has occurred, you are better-informed than I. I have heard nothing of the sort. Only of the boy sorting out his estate and finances, on his own with his lawyers." He smirked, a twist of his lips only Draco perhaps knew him well enough to read as uncomfortable, at the lack of change in Draco's own expression. "Do you not believe me, vain boy? Do you think I would lie to you about something so important? So vital to your safety? I would *not.* I swear it to you."

"Swear it on-" Draco bit his lip. "Swear it on your Patronus." It was the closest he dared to asking Severus to swear on Lily Potter.

Severus's gaze flickered darkly, but he did not hesitate. "I swear it on my Patronus. Theo has no connection to the Death Eaters. But you cannot live with him still. And Dumbledore has a solution. He has consulted with the Sorting Hat, and with your name change, he has the power as headmaster to put you forward once again, at the start of the year. Draco, you are to be Sorted again at Hogwarts this fall."

The Sixth-Year Sorting

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Since there seems to still be some confusion about the Naufragiam, I've copied here the relevant section from chapter 16 of Book 4. Just skip this if you feel caught up on it.

In the chapter, Theo reads that just a drop induces withering over time with the Dominexcorio incantation. As Draco later learns through experience, the effect of a larger quantity applied with force and speed, like Luna did to Voldemort at the Department of Ministries, has an exponentially stronger and quicker effect.

From The Wheel of Hecate:

Draco had a lot of free time to spend lolling about in bed feeling sorry for himself, which meant a lot of time to bellow for Theo to come read to him. They hadn't heard back yet from Charlie, but there was the dark magic tomes to look through. And they happened by chance upon a page, listed after Cadaunuptium in Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate, whose name caught Draco's attention: Naufragiam.

"Don't you want to hear about Cadaunuptium first?" Theo teased gently. "It's precisely what it sounds like, from the..." He wrinkled his nose. "Illustrations."

"Naufragiam," Draco said, with some dim intimation that the Latin roots were echoing something he had heard once, something fatally important. He settled back against his emerald sheets with a yowling, dubious sort of yawn. Theo obligingly returned to the passage, soft sandy hair falling in his eyes. He brushed it aside and set to reading in that level tenor, as he spoke words that made Draco's heart pound faster than any words ever had from those pretty Slytherin lips.

"'The Naufragiam ritual'," Theo read, "'Also known as the Shipwreck Scourge, shall force the shipwrecked to remain in the place where the ritual binds him, for two sunsets. Wards of demonic force shall hold the shipwrecked linked to the soil of the ground, and nothing shall force him from this dirt, nor shall any escape be nigh. Not by flight of foot, flight in air, carried by another, not by any magicks in the earth and sky and pit shall the shipwrecked rise from his homeland...' Sounds useful for slavery, doesn't it? That might be kind of thing that would interest your aunt..."

Draco's mouth had gone dry. He had to lick his lips several times to wet it enough to speak, and Theo's sideways glance at him was just white noise with the thrumming in his veins of possibility. "It's temporary, though, right? Two sunsets. So I don't know how useful..."

"It says for the simple shipwreck- yes, two sunsets," Theo explained, surveying the page with those ever-sharp blue eyes, "That the victim ingests the potion. With or without his knowledge, you'd think. But there's another part to the ritual to bind them longer. Let's see... the administration of even a drop of Naufragiam, whatever the initial quantity taken, on the skin of one who had ever taken the same batch- along with the curse Dominexcorio- compels him to return to that... they call it homeland. If a full lunar cycle passes without that return, the skin touched begins to wither, and eventually all of the victim's skin falls off his bones." Theo shot Draco a more thoughtful sideways stare. "This is dark."

"It's perfect," Draco breathed, and Theo's eyes narrowed so much that he was forced to quickly add, "For slavery, yeah, the extended ritual... funny they don't administer that to prisoners in Azkaban..."

"Look at the potion for it, though," Theo said dryly, handing over the book. Its formidable weight barely registered, with the restless buzzing come alive under Draco's skin. "Time-consuming, rare and esoteric ingredients- expensive- and it's for an individual only. Easier to just rely on wards. And Dementors, of course..."

Draco tuned Theo out, staring frantically at the page. Three months total to make, with one month brewing, then a blood ritual, and two months of brewing after that. The ingredients were ones he could theoretically get, as a Malfoy.

"Seeking slaves does seem to be a natural progression for you," Theo quipped, and Draco grabbed Theo, kissed him hard enough on the cheek that the sound echoed throughout the dorm, and then shoved him straight out of his bed and closed the curtains between them.

Playlist

Sirius and Remus dropped them off to meet the Weasleys, Hermione, and Luna, and the only reunion more joyous than Draco with his cousin was with Hagrid. The moment they saw Hagrid in the Leaky Cauldron, Draco could tell he had heard his OWL results. "There yeh are, little dragon!" Hagrid exclaimed, heading straight for Draco with a big smile. "Got an O in Care of Magical Creatures, ah 'ear! Someone's an expert now, eh?"

Draco headed right for Hagrid, and gave him a sizable, unabashed hug. If he was seen hugging the groundskeeper... well, he had far worse things on his calling card these days.

Once he had gotten his fill of hugging, he tried to thank Hagrid properly. "Thank you so much, Hagrid. If you hadn't given me private lessons..." Draco began. But Hagrid shook his head merrily as he tapped the bricks to open the way to Diagon Alley, which turned out to be much changed.

"It were yer smarts, little dragon," Hagrid said, "No thanks needed..." His voice trailed off when he saw Harry's face registering the changes to Diagon Alley.

Harry looked more pained with every boarded-up window and wanted poster they passed. People were huddled in furtive little groups, and there were seedy stalls that had Mr. Weasley bristling at their shameless unlicensed amulet trade. *It will get worse before it ever gets better. And unfortunately, there are still* children *here.* Even Draco had to admit he wasn't pleased to be passing his aunt's face with every few steps, cackling wordlessly at him. Or at the loss of the ice cream parlor. Talk about *war* crimes.

However much the reality of the wizarding world was beginning to show up in the aspect of the once-joyous streets, they separated anyway. Hagrid took the sixth-years to get new robes, while Mr. and Mrs. Weasley took the fifth-years to Flourish and Blotts.

"Goodbye, cousin!" Draco called after Luna. As much as he had publicly mocked the extreme caution the Weasleys had been exercising, he felt compelled to draw Mrs. Weasley aside. "You do know Luna is the other side's prime target right now, right? Probably even over Harry..."

"We'll never let any harm come to that sweet girl," Mrs. Weasley promised, and when Draco believed that resolute Gryffindor look in her eyes, he let them split up.

Hagrid stood guard outside Madam Malkin's. Draco had an uneasy feeling, but he hadn't put in any special notes about sixth-year Diagon Alley save his visit to Borgin and Burke's, which was obviously out. That was covered under the first item on the year's agenda, *1. Destroy the vanishing cabinet at Hogwarts if it's the last thing you ever do.* He ignored the pricking feeling he was forgetting something, and busied himself as fashion coach to Harry on his new school robes, and then Hermione on her new dress robes. Ron had no interest in letting Draco offer sartorial suggestions when it came to his turn, shooing him off. He seemed to lose the will to be ornery when it came to Hermione, though, letting her linger to offer unsolicited suggestions of her own.

Draco found himself drawn to the small display of jewelry near the front of the store, where a young shopgirl with a nametag of Alice was happy to get out the case and show off their wares to Famous Harry Potter. "It was just my birthday in June," Draco admonished Harry once he asked the girl after hair clasps. She began to look through the case for some anyway. "And you gave me a very expensive present..."

"No, it's just-" Harry bit his lip, looking almost as awkward as people did when corrected about Draco's new name. "You're going to be... re-sorted, aren't you?" He knew how sensitive Draco was about that, "And the last clasp I gave you was silver and green, and S for Slytherin..."

"I'm just going to have to do a great deal of color-based transfiguration," Draco sighed, "And I can't turn it all preemptively red and gold, Harry, it's not guaranteed I'll end up in Gryffindor no matter how bad you want it." He smiled reassuringly at the girl, when she returned from the back to tell him that no, they had nothing like that. "Thanks, don't worry. I know it's not a specialty shop."

"Draco loves jewelry," Harry told the shopgirl earnestly, and she shot a brief terrified look in Draco's direction that showed she read the Daily Prophet. Then she camouflaged it by gushing nervously about some of her favorite pieces.

"I'm wearing one of the Madam Malkin exclusives," she finished, leaning forward to show them the AEB in delicate rose gold letters that hung on a short chain around her neck. Draco pushed back the brief, incredibly irrational surge of jealousy in him at the sight of Harry leaning in as well to study the pretty blonde shopgirl's neck, and examined it as well. "It would make a lovely gift for any witch in your life, if that's the kind of thing that might interest you..."

She no doubt assumed Harry had wanted the hair clasp for some long-haired girl. "Let's see," Draco said, picking up a curling little H charm from the smaller case at the bottom of the whole jewelry one, which was piled with exquisite little charms that attested to many, many rounds of Aurulaquerum. "Is there any special magic or charms on it?"

"There's shine and anti-rusting charms," she said, sounding relieved to be able to offer something to please the taste of Famous Harry Potter and his associate. "And if you look closer, every letter is embellished with a pattern of hundred very small pieces of rose quartz. It's known as the stone of unconditional love..."

"H, huh?" Harry laughed, poking his head over Draco's shoulder. "Unconditional love?"

Draco had been thinking of H for Hermione, like the charm on her bracelet, but he could hardly embarrass Harry in front of an already wide-eyed shopgirl by saying so. "Unconditional love," he repeated, and found J and P charms and placed them next to each other to make Harry's initials.

Once he had the HJP together, he found it to have a curious rightness. When he tilted his head and moved it around, he could see light filtered in from outside catching on the glistening rose quartz, pale and ethereal in sunlight. "What do you think?"

"If Mr. Potter has a sweetheart," the girl said earnestly, "This would be a fine gift for her. It's not uncommon, you know, to gift your initials to wear on a chain around the neck. Some people think it's chauvinistic, like a sign of ownership, but I think it's romantic..." She touched her own necklace, looking a little sad, perhaps at the thought that she had no one else's initials to wear, only her own. "Some people like that, the constant reminder of their beloved... but only if it's very serious..."

"Can I see it on a chain? A short one that you could see over a Hogwarts tie, right at the neck," Draco instructed. Alice got one for him, no doubt picturing some sweet innocent Gryffindor girl as the recipient. It was likely a girl not unlike Ginny in her mind. Draco threaded each charm through in turn, then turned to Harry with a furtive little smile on his face.

"What do you think?" Draco whispered. "Would it suit me?" It couldn't be any more horrifying for his godfather to see than what would hopefully be a Gryffindor tie around his neck.

Harry's face turned scarlet red. "You... you'd want to wear my initials?"

"Let me try it on," Draco drawled, "To see how it would look on Potter's girl," he told Alice, and she nodded. Harry inhaled sharply when Draco lifted his hair. Draco doubted he would have been able to resist the impulse to nuzzle or sniff there, or even put his mouth to Draco's neck, had the shopgirl not been right there watching. Harry took off the dragon necklace, and replaced it with the shorter chain. It fit right at Draco's throat, too thin and fragile to cut into the skin or hurt. He didn't need to look in a mirror to judge it, only Harry's eyes.

"Oh my God," Harry breathed, fingers brushing through Draco's hair before he let it go. His nostrils actually flared at the sight of his initials around Draco's neck, the possessive bastard. He gripped onto the side of the counter, before touching the rose gold letters. "Would you... God, Draco, would you let me buy this for you? I mean, I know it might be embarrassing- you could just wear it in private..."

"I'd wear it at Hogwarts," Draco said confidently. "Every *day*."

Harry seemed to forget the shopgirl's existence completely, as he leaned in to press a disbelieving, adoring kiss to Draco's mouth, fingers still on Draco's neck.

When their lips parted, Alice was not the only one watching. Narcissa Malfoy was standing behind them with a set of dress robes in her arms, waiting to check out. She must have already been inside the shop before they came. She did not have Alice's surprise on her pinched but lovely face. There was no expression at all in her light eyes.

"Mother," Draco gasped. Harry put a hand on Draco's shoulder, arm sliding around them to make unmistakable his reaction, should any harm be attempted against the boy who wore his initials.

Mother's gaze dropped to the counter first, where the discarded Antipodean Opaleye lay, one of her last presents to him. Then it went to Harry's hand on his neck, which dropped away, exposing the necklace. Draco had wondered how much it would show up against his pale skin, but he was paler yet than the rose gold, and the shape of it seemed to show.

Mother's eyes registered the letters, looking from the initials to Harry with slow fury dawning in her eyes. She looked at Harry like a thief flaunting what he had stolen before her eyes.

She was flaunting the talon brand, not attempting to conceal it as she brushed past them and lay her purchase on the other end of the counter. A shell-shocked Alice quickly rang her up.

Harry's eyes went to Mother's marked palm, though he had not taken his protective arm off Draco. Slowly, Draco's ears began to produce the sounds that his mother had made as he tortured her, activating the brand over and over...

"Mother," Draco said again, inaudible to anyone but Harry. He ran his fingers over Mother's wand in his pocket. He didn't know what he intended with it. To give it back? To snap it in front of her? At least she was conveniently close to Ollivander's, not that she wouldn't have secured a replacement already. She would need one now that she was-

A *Death Eater*, Severus had said. She had taken the Mark already.

It made Draco want to disappear, watching her graceful hands pay for her robes, like he had watched them pay for so many things over so many years, knowing the left wrist beneath her lavender robes was no longer untarnished. He had no idea in the world what to say, even once she had finished paying, and turned to face them. Draco had no words.

"Mr. Potter," she said calmly, with a nod, "Mr. Black," with another nod, and left the shop.

"I'm not going to be a Hufflepuff" had become Draco's mantra. "I'm not going to be a Hufflepuff. Even if I've made my feelings on that fedora wannabe apparent, the thing is professional. The only one in its line of work. It's not going to let personal grudges affect its judgment. It will listen if I tell it *not Hufflepuff*..."

"You mean *not Slytherin*?" their still-frequent visitor Hermione said judgmentally, looking up from *Grindelwald: The Durmstrang Years*. "Shouldn't you be more worried that the hat will just put you right back there?"

Draco swallowed at the thought. "I couldn't do that to Theo." He tried to think of some foolproof argument to make his Sorting private, to be redone if necessary. But having him re-sorted was dodgy enough. Everyone would think his name change was being used as a thin pretext to deal with the unprecedented situation at hand, a Hogwarts student potentially having to share a house, year, and dorm with his own father's murderer. Hopefully Dumbledore would give the hat a stern talking-to, to prevent that apocalyptic scenario.

In truth, Draco wasn't exactly chomping at the bit to face the other Slytherins either, even the Kingsnakes. No, *especially* the Kingsnakes. His old friends were the ones who could rightfully call him to account. Draco didn't know, with them or with Theo, whether to try and offer some apology or explanation, or just leave it alone. Would that be better? To finish out their remaining two years- or perhaps only one year- at Hogwarts pretending the other didn't exist? He'd been afraid to talk to anyone about it, even Remus. He didn't want his body count preeminent in their minds when they thought of him.

Not Slytherin was more vital than *not Hufflepuff*. He resolved to keep his priorities straight. Becoming a loser was surely better than being burned alive in his sleep. Within 72 hours of murdering Cantankerous Nott, he had concluded *that* would be his own preferred method of tackling the situation in the others' place, catching Draco unawares without having to break the locking charm on his curtains, and giving plausible deniability.

He roleplayed being Sorted with Hermione as well as Harry several times. Hermione had the merit of also having had a near-hat stall. They went through what she had in her first year, assuming optimistically that he would be split between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. "You'll be a Gryffindor," Hermione kept reassuring him. "You've been adopted by a Gryffindor, all your friends are except Luna, and you've been in so many big duels, there's no denying how brave and strong you've become." He thought she was laying it on a bit thick for the sake of his ego, but her big brown eyes shone in earnest.

He took her opinion in stock as much as possible, for someone who had spent her childhood emulating someone who had fallen in love with a large hairy psychotic captor. She regretted ever letting Draco find out about her Disney childhood. He liked to mock her indignant justification that Belle had been brunette, bookish, and shy like her. "Should I take this," Draco drawled, "As indicative of future romantic leanings towards the patently unworthy, or *hirsute*," and enjoyed his subsequent well-earned walloping with his own pillow. When Harry heard them discussing the story, he remarked rather indiscreetly but honestly that the story was more like Sirius and Remus, except even after their marriage, Remus was still a werewolf.

Draco should have been indignant, like Hermione was. But he was just grateful that Harry didn't see the two of them in that unlikely pairing. Outer and inner beauty, faced with outer prettiness and inward monstrosity.

He could be whatever he was inside, though, as long as the hat didn't call it a Slytherin. He'd personally always thought the other houses far more beast-like than Slytherin, after all, if only because of their inherent self-deception and hypocrisy, Gryffindor most of all. So, yes, not Slytherin. *Not Slytherin.* And Draco wanted to stay with Severus so badly. He *was* a Slytherin, far more securely than he had been a Malfoy, and would have been *Draco Snape* ahead of anything given the chance. But he would be anything that could keep him away from Theo, because when it came to the monstrous thing he had done, he was still, it seemed, at his heart a coward.

"Are you really going to bring all of that?" a supervising Hermione asked skeptically, on their final day packing. "Ron isn't going to let you put all that up on their dorm wall."

Draco ignored her and continued his careful process of applying sticking charms. Then he used a number of shrinking charms in a row and folding charms to reduce his Hallows board to a pocket-sized little cube of wood. A shrunk velvet curtain to cover it followed, before he began the process of packing his dragon necklaces. Hermione helped him at stowing them in Unbreakable Eggs, sandwiched between green robes that he was almost sure would soon be red.

"I'm going to figure all this out at Hogwarts," Draco promised her. "Mark my words. I'm not finishing out sixth year without knowing everything there is to know about the Hallows."

"And if this all is a wild goose chase?" she asked, wincing.

"Then," Draco said serenely, "I'll only have wasted my own time. And, well, yours, but honestly, Striker, what are friends for?"

"It really is a blessing," Hermione sighed, "That you can't be sorted to come live in the Gryffindor *girls* dorm," and he poked at her thick hair with a sideways grin.

"You're going to miss being able to stay over and sleep at my house, won't you? Won't you?"

"I think I am," she said, with a long eye-roll, "But only when you consider that the person sleeping nearest to me now will be Lavender Brown."

"Don't worry," Draco said confidently, "I'm not letting her anywhere near Ron, no matter how much she fancies him."

"As if I care," Hermione said in instinctive disdain, before her head whipped around. "Wait, what? Lavender fancies Ron?"

"Not that you care or anything," Draco deadpanned, and watched her turn back around slowly, face a guilty red. Gryffindor red.

Harry interrupted the shrieking and pillow-fighting that resulted, and looked glum at Draco's refusal to let him in on the cause of their combat. He had looked still glummer, of course, at the announcement that they would have to *go slow* when it came to the physical. But that had not prevented the free application of hands, nor of Draco's mouth a few surreptitious times, nor affected the frequency of contact. Just because they were going slow, didn't mean they couldn't go slow *often.*

And finding out Draco could be a Gryffindor had left Harry certain that they would not have to curtail their proximity too much even at Hogwarts, save in respect for their dormmates. Draco had become a Slytherin the last time, after all, because he *asked*. Harry seemed confident that if Draco asked for Gryffindor, he would get it, and they would stay living together.

Draco only wished for Harry's confidence. It had been distressingly easy to get used to this, being able to touch Harry Potter almost whenever he liked. Some part of him felt he had the right, with Harry's initials around his neck.

Gryffindor red was the color that Draco kept in his mind the morning they left for King's Cross. He looked for a long moment at Remus and Sirius each in turn, trying to imbibe some ineffable Gryffindor quality off them by osmosis. Then Sirius pulled him into a hug, telling him to stop staring at them like a weirdo and get a move on.

Gryffindor was the rhythm to each of Draco's steps as he and Harry found a compartment. He closely watched the Gryffindor par excellence bar none as they entered, close enough that Harry reached out and softly took his hand. That was invitation enough for Draco to attach himself to Harry's mouth, in need of that primal physical reassurance. He lost track of time, kissing Harry right there in the train compartment, until a voice that sounded like Neville's let out a startled noise.

"Hello, Neville!" Luna's voice called, because apparently, Luna was in there with them too. When Draco pulled away from Harry, he found her well-settled, happily watching her cousin snog the Chosen One's face off. And her pleased face went still brighter at the sight of Neville.

"Oh, hi," Neville said. It was hard to tell if his round face was redder because of the PDA he'd walked in on, or Luna's presence, as his official girlfriend with a capital G. It would have been naive to think Neville Longbottom would take naturally to having a girlfriend. He only had a sure hand when it came to plants. "Harry, Draco, I've written you this, but congratulations on joining Professor Lupin's family... and Draco, I heard you got twelve Os! Congratulations, that's mental- Luna?" He looked down where Luna was tugging on the sleeve of his shirt, lips pursed. "What is it?"

"Don't I get a kiss?" Luna asked sadly. "Harry was snogging Draco for ages before you showed up, and they've been living together a month."

"Oh, alright," said Neville, turning redder, and leaned down and gave Luna a peck on the lips, with a self-conscious look over at Harry and Draco. Luna settled back in her seat with a small cute pout, which deepened when Neville sat beside Harry instead of her.

Oh no. Oh *no*. If Luna started comparing Neville's level of passion for her to Harry's for Draco, she would think Neville actively despised her. It wasn't Neville's fault that Harry was less like a human boyfriend and more like an Amortentia-soused octopus.

"Got any more plants to show off this year, Neville? Any with intriguing *excretions*?" Draco drawled, setting Neville into nervous laughter at the memory of dousing them with Stinksap. As the Hogwarts Express moved, Draco thought he ought to dislodge himself from Harry's lap, but when he made a half-hearted effort, Harry's soft protesting noise gave him the excuse to stay in place. So Draco just turned to face the others, letting Harry pull him close from behind. He snuggled back against Harry, as secure in Luna and Neville's presence as if they were alone, and Harry wrapped his arms tightly around Draco's shoulders.

So he got another dose of Harry, before they finally had to separate to put on their robes. Neville and Luna were already putting theirs on. Neville was looking over at them with panic, as if wondering if he too was expected to conduct an inspection of Luna's shoulders.

Draco tried and failed not to watch Harry change. "Don't look at me like that," Harry whispered to Draco, and then, "You're not wearing your Slytherin tie," noticing Draco was already changed to his robes with no sign of color affiliation anywhere. "No point pretending, I guess..."

"You look really grown-up," Draco whispered. He pressed a furtive kiss to Harry's neck before reaching into his bag and pulling out a small sachet. "Here," he said, lifting up his hair, and Harry's face took on a grin so broad, it was almost audible, as he saw the HJP necklace offered. He pressed a quick kiss to Draco's nape before putting it on for him.

Draco had to repulse Harry's attempts to truly snog him into oblivion then. Even if Harry's tan made his eyes look even greener, and kissing put the most beautiful flush on those already very pink lips...

It was like Remus had warned. Hormones *were* hormones. Merlin save Draco from sixteen-year-old hormones. Harry's *and* his own. But poor Neville and Luna. With effort, a now house-less Draco settled himself beside Luna instead for the rest of the ride.

"So," she said. "Neville, I've told you Draco is getting re-sorted, haven't I?"

"Yes," Neville said, before seeming to realize his Luna-induced shyness could be read as lack of excitement at the prospect. "Draco, I hope you'll be in Gryffindor too- oi, come back here, Trevor- no, Draco, don't curse him-"

"Petrificus totalus," Draco cast, "Too late," and handed a frozen toad back to Neville.

Neville opened his mouth to protest again, but saw Luna beamed happily. "Petrificus toad-talus!" she said, waving her hands. Draco snorted in laughter, while Harry and Neville got queasy looks. There was a slight divide in ethics here, or perhaps just in taste for puns.

"I'm not messing about searching the whole train for him," Draco said, before Harry kept giving him a look. "Okay, fine. Finite incantatem. But don't you let him out of your hands."

Luna looked quite bitter at Trevor, for getting to be the one who spent the Hogwarts Express ride being pawed by Neville Longbottom.

Meanwhile, Neville looked to be having flashbacks at the sight of that particular spell. Draco knew Hermione, for one, had used it on him to memorable effect in first year. But Neville rallied. "So, er, Harry, are we having DA meetings this year?"

"No point now we've got rid of Umbridge, is there?" Harry said, before casting a worried look at Draco. "Luna's told you that Professor Snape..."

"Yes," Neville said unhappily, looking like he thought he could have used the extra review from DA against his Boggart. Poor sod had probably thought dropping potions would mean he was finally rid of Severus. But he didn't dare say anything remotely negative about Draco's godfather.

"I'm sure Draco's godfather will do a great job teaching us," Harry said reassuringly, "He knows so much about the dark arts- I mean Defense! Defense Against the Dark Arts! Ow ow ow-"

Draco had begun poking Harry squarely in the scar, rather more viciously than usual, only to break off when the compartment door opened. A bunch of fourth-year girls were outside, with whispers and giggles reminiscent of Pansy at her most shamelessly amorous. Back in *second* year. No Slytherin would have the lack of self-respect to comport herself in such a way once a teenager-

Draco should probably try and stop thinking of Slytherins as so superior, if he was truly to stop being one.

"You ask him!"

"No, you!"

"I'll do it!"

One of the girls, with dark hair and a Gryffindor tie, made her way inside, the chosen representative of this ill-considered venture. "Hi, Harry, I'm Romilda, Romilda Vane," she said, as if that was something worth noting to Harry fucking Potter. "Why don't you join us in our compartment? You don't have to sit with *them*." Her gaze swept over Neville, Luna, and Draco, seeming to find each objectionable in turn, if perhaps for diverging reasons.

Luna touched Draco's hand before it could go to his wand pocket. "Don't curse her," Luna whispered. "She's just a child."

"They're friends of mine," Harry said, resting a hand on Neville's shoulder.

That made the girls beat a hasty retreat. "People expect you to have cooler friends than us," Luna observed. Before Draco could protest that no one on the planet was cooler than his cousin, Harry gave them all a heated look with those splendid green eyes that took Draco's breath away.

"You are cool," Harry said, level and resolute. "None of them was at the Ministry. They didn't fight with me."

Draco leaned over to give Harry a kiss for that, which he regretted when it made Neville look embarrassed. It was a bit of a conundrum, if shows of public affection made Luna expect the same from Neville, but Neville did rally enough to reach out for Luna's hand. He looked almost stupid with happiness when she squeezed it back. *He doesn't dislike you, Luna, he's just terrified of messing this up.* No matter how much you wanted to touch something, it was hard not to hesitate at it, if you thought touching it would wreck it. Draco could empathize with that feeling.

Eventually, Ron and Hermione arrived, finished with prefect duty and full of stories about being gawked at. But the notoriety from the Battle of the Ministry did not seem to count for either them or Luna, when it came to the estimable Horace Slughorn.

A third-year girl invaded their compartment, forcing Luna to forestall Draco once again reaching for his wand. But this intruder had scrolls of parchment with purple ribbons. "I'm supposed to deliver these to Neville Longbottom, Harry P-Potter, and Draco Malfoy," she said, looking terrified to have to speak to Famous Harry Potter, only for her eyes to go wide in horror when she saw the hesitation on Harry's face.

"Do you mean Draco Black?" Harry corrected gently. She checked the scroll, nodded wide-eyed, and shoved them each their scroll before positively fleeing the compartment.

Draco,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a bite of lunch in compartment C.

Sincerely, Professor H.E.F. Slughorn

"You two have fun," Draco said, rolling up the parchment with a spike of puerile bitterness. He remembered how much he'd wanted to be included in the blue loop. He'd been snubbed badly by the man who had once been Slytherin Head of House, who by all reports had sucked up to *Father* like his life depended on it. As a result of Draco's family having fallen from grace, though, his father very publicly put in Azkaban, Slughorn had dropped the Malfoys like a hot potato. But it seemed that with a new family came sycophancy renewed.

It was objectively unfair to hold people's actions in the blue loop against them. Accusations of hypocrisy didn't hold when based on another timeline. But Draco had been unfair for so long, why stop now?

"We don't have to go?" Neville asked anxiously.

Draco told them both to go, claiming he had an upset stomach and heading out of the compartment. Harry was adamant that Draco should come, and then worried about him not feeling well. Eventually, though, he let Draco flee to the boy's restroom on the train, where he spent a not inconsiderable stretch of time leaned over the sink, staring at his reflection.

With every advancing moment came a reminder of that awful sixth year, the constant state of terror that had worn his nerves so thin, it was like he himself was the Dementor, draining at his insides. With every moment came closer the moment when Dumbledore would have his reckoning. When Severus would. Except Draco had no clarity how to handle what was going to unfold, without his own vital role performed. He had rendered himself obsolete by changing sides. And he could not assume anyone would behave the same, without that one great catastrophic deed of his. Theo couldn't be slotted in as neatly for him as he had initially feared, if he succeeded in destroying the vanishing cabinet. There was the Unbreakable Vow that Severus had cast to Mother to help Draco-

Would Severus have made that vow for Theo? If that was even *why* he killed Dumbledore-

"Why am I not surprised to find you in front of a mirror?"

Draco turned, wand instantly drawn in the air, and Millicent Bulstrode snorted derisively, not looking intimidated whatsoever. "What," Millie said dryly, "Do you expect me to cower in fear now that you're *officially* a murderer?" Even if the Slytherin Keeper's face had not been paralyzing, the green of her tie behind his wand would have been.

"Millie," Draco said, heart gone to his throat. He put away the talon wand, but kept his hand in his pocket. "This is a boy's loo..."

"I'm not going to hang around for long," Millie said, a coldness to her voice that he had never heard there, not for him. "I just have to give you a warning."

"You're here to threaten me?" Draco asked, and Millie snorted.

"To warn *you*," she said flatly. "Believe me, I'd rather not be talking to you at all-"

Draco's self-protective reserve punctured. "Millie," he said, voice cracking, "I didn't *want* to do it- not Theo's father- he was going to kill my uncle, he was casting the Killing curse-"

"All the boys say," Millie interrupted calmly, "That after your Boggart was Bellatrix Lestrange, back in third year, you threatened their fathers."

The memory of that hysterical threat went through him. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten that. Maybe because he'd been trying to think of Nott as little as possible. "Millie, it wasn't calculated like that, though, when it actually happened- it was in the middle of battle-"

"Blaise says you told them- all the boys with Death Eater fathers- that if their families went back to supporting your aunt or the Dark Lord, that you would *kill* their fathers. Did you say that?" Slowly, Draco nodded, and she flinched, crossing her arms and looking genuinely afraid of him.

"How is Theo?" Draco breathed miserably. "I know I don't have the right to ask. I wrote him so many letters I didn't send... Millie, will you tell him that I-"

"I'm not here to help you soothe your conscience," Millie snapped, "For turning on your own. I'm just here to say that I know Theo sent you a black dagger. *Everyone* knows." *Everyone* seemed to mean everyone in Slytherin. "And warn you- Theo meant it when he sent that black dagger. He really wants you dead. And everyone... they're with him." Except, presumably, for her. Her next question cast a shade on that, as she asked, "Why is Theo still here?"

Draco blanched, stepping away from her, closer to the mirror. "Why is he still alive? I'm not going to go after him in retaliation for the dagger, if that's what you're worried about-"

"I meant," Millie said grimly, "At Hogwarts, though I suppose we'd be wise to worry about that prospect too. Why hasn't Theo been expelled for sending that? We all thought he would be. Why is he just coming back to Hogwarts like nothing's changed?" Draco was silent, and Millie's broad honest face changed, just the slightest flicker. "Did you not tell anyone?"

Draco nodded tersely. But he did not feel like explaining why. He heard himself ask a question he shouldn't have, if he truly trusted Severus. "Is Theo a Death Eater now?"

The sudden ferocity in Millie's eyes then was something to behold. "I'm not involved in all that. I stay as neutral as I can. I don't pick sides. I *have* a future. But if it comes to protecting my friends, then I *will* choose a side. And you know what side I'd choose." She crossed her arms more tightly. "I'm never giving you *information*, more than I've just said, so don't ask. I'm not betraying anyone. Maybe I already am by warning you, but..." She turned away, agitated with herself, a rare loss in composure. "I just don't want *them* to get in trouble by *killing* you, that's all."

"Millie," Draco said, throat clogging up, "Millie, I am *so* sorry..."

"You're not wearing your Slytherin tie," she observed dispassionately, then took a long closer look. "And no opal dragon anymore. That new necklace says..."

"I'm getting re-sorted," Draco admitted, and her face filled with surprise, then contempt.

"That's for the best, then," she said. "You know that if you had tried to stay Quidditch captain, no one would have played on the team. Not a single Slytherin." Draco nodded. "And if you had tried to stay in the Slytherin dorms, they would have..."

"Thank you, Millie," Draco said tightly, "Thank you for warning me," and she turned on her heel and stalked out without another word, leaving the air behind her thick with spite.

Draco didn't emerge from the bathroom until near the end of the train ride, and his friends found him unusually pale and quiet. It was a surprise to find that even now, no one but him, Harry, and Luna could see the Thestrals, though he supposed none of the other Gryffindors had directly watched as he killed Nott. He held onto Harry's side tightly during the ride to the castle, still not saying much. "You're worried about your Sorting, aren't you?" Hermione said, and Draco found it truer than ever. He nodded, and Hermione stroked his hair.

The first stumbling block was Filch with his Secrecy Sensor at the entrance to the Great Hall, which Draco had somehow forgotten from the blue loop. Hermione said it was like a Muggle metal detector, used to scan for firearms or bombs. "Better be careful, Cannon. A cannon, that's a regular weapon, isn't it," Draco teased Ron, only to think of his own pockets.

But it just took a mumbled Confundus charm cast behind Filch's back on the sensor to get himself past safely. He wasn't taking any chances with his pockets, which at the moment contained his moonstone dagger, an assortment of seven potion vials in his pocket including Naufragiam and Liquid Fiendfyre, the talon wand, and three other wands that were also technically stolen. He hadn't been about to trust them to the luggage, and he got them past security now. He earned a disapproving look from Hermione, who hadn't missed the charm, but she said nothing.

He had to break off from the others after that, but Luna was thankfully in position to stop his steps towards the Slytherin table. "Draco, you need to stay up front and be sorted," she whispered, to a cousin who had gone on the worst kind of autopilot.

"I can't sit with Luna-Luna until then?" he asked childishly, trying to put a cute face on his mistake. She gave him a hug before sending him away.

He went to stand below the high table. The second-years and up were all streaming in, all knowing their place other than him. Hagrid was the only teacher missing. Dumbledore was there, with the blackened hand that Draco remembered, the wound to which he had attributed his ability to disarm Dumbledore of the Elder Wand in the blue loop. Weakness might be good now, if it made Dumbledore marginally more inclined to give Draco answers. Not that Draco had the nerve to ask for them. There was McGonagall, his presumptive Head of House, who he made sure to give a nod when she descended to collect the first-years for Sorting. There was Slughorn, who looked at Draco sullenly, after having had his invitation ignored. Draco resolved to be neutral to the man from then on, not needing another enemy.

Most importantly, there was Severus. Draco's heart brightened to see him, looking the same as their last meeting from a distance. Severus didn't meet his gaze, making small talk with Sinistra at his side. Draco reminded himself that Severus had a cover to keep up, a matter of

life and death. He would be different when they were alone. Things would be as they had been. Or as much as they could be, with a different color around Draco's neck.

The first-years cast terrified glances at Draco as they were led out. Standing in their midst made Draco feel like some outsize giant. He glanced fondly up at the high table, but of course, as he had just remarked to himself, Hagrid was absent.

McGonagall set the Hat down. It embarked on one of its overblown lyrical odysseys about the important of unity and inter-house cooperation, as if a single person in that hall had any intention of listening. At last, it fell silent to do its work, regardless of its own rather avant-garde feelings in development regarding the Sorting system.

Rather than immediately call out the first name in the alphabet, McGonagall waited for silence, and then informed the hall, "One of our sixth-years has had a change in name, and will be re-sorted as a result." It was that dry, no further explanation given. Perhaps, since the real reason had been in the Prophet, there was no necessity. What was she going to say? *If you're unhappy with your house and want to be re-sorted, first-years, just kill one of your housemates' family members?*

Draco looked in the direction of Slytherin for their reaction. He saw him for the first time since he slashed his father open: Theodore Nott, flanked by Blaise and Millie, his sandy blond hair making him stand out almost as much as his pallor, good looks still obvious but turned more brooding and gaunt, with a discontented slump to his shoulders. He still looked like *Theo.* He was looking at Draco, like much of the hall were. When Draco noticed, their eyes met.

It felt rather like Draco imagined it must feel when Harry's scar hurt, his head filling with a rolling guilt that almost ruddied his vision. He wondered if Millie had told Theo what he said. He couldn't imagine she would, since it meant admitting they'd spoken.

Draco turned uncomfortably towards McGonagall, waiting for her to finish with the A and early B names. He personally despised and wished death upon each and every first-year with a name in the alphabet before Black. The sound of one of the Bs sorted into Slytherin did not ease his nerves, with the thought of that inhuman voice soon calling out the same for him-

"Black, Draco!"

Draco sat down on the stool, pitying the majority of the first-years still waiting. He had a sinking feeling they could be standing for a while. Unless the Hat decided to switch it up and just yell out Slytherin right away, to really dig the knife in. What would the professors do if he got Slytherin, when this had so transparently been done to get him away from there?

When he got the Hat on his head, he began to tell it, *Not Slytherin, Not Slytherin*. Harry said he had given the same mantra to the hat at his Sorting. And it had worked for him.

"Hmm," the Sorting Hat said, sending chills down his spine with its mere voice. He had badmouthed it for years after his sorting of a record length, its production of the Sword of Gryffindor in second year to save them from the Basilisk notwithstanding. He'd never thought he'd have cause to regret that. "Students have been sorted twice before. But never

three times. You are extraordinary, Draco Malfoy, if perhaps not in the ways you would like..."

Don't call me that, Draco thought furiously, abandoning his resolution to be civil. *My name is Draco Lupin Black. That's who you're sorting. You've never sorted Draco Black before.*

"Ah," the Hat mused. "Is it Draco Malfoy, then, who killed those people, and not Draco Black?" Draco's spine went ramrod-straight in the uncomfortable stool, only designed for first-years to sit on for seconds. "Is it *four* you have killed since we last spoke?"

If you count Periander, Draco thought with a shudder, *And Maledictum, who I think was a Maledictus, so yes, four.* He tried to suppress the thought, *Can I be put anywhere* but *Slytherin now that I've killed people?* But he found that he couldn't.

"Do *you* count them?" the Hat asked slyly, and in this question might be the key to where Draco ended up.

He answered honestly in his head, trying to tune out the low murmurs of the hall full of people he was once again keeping waiting. *Yes, I do. Because I was the one who cast the Killing curse on that snake that poisoned Maledictum. And the bond between them must have killed Periander, too. I didn't know that would happen. I didn't understand my wand, I still don't. But I didn't* want *to cast Avada Kedavra. I let my father make me. I was* weak, *and that's why they're dead.*

"So you are trying to take responsibility," the Hat surmised.

I am, Draco thought, *And you heard me, what I killed was a snake. I've* killed *the snake in me. Give me anywhere but Slytherin, because I killed the wrong Slytherin and I'm not safe there. Maybe I'm cunning or ruthless, but I don't have the ambition anymore, either. I'd have to hurt Theo if I'm there, and I can't. I just* can't. *I couldn't even tell anyone he sent me that dagger.*

"Not even the godfather," the hat added helpfully, "Whom you begged to join in Slytherin."

My godfather was my Head of House, but even he surely knows I don't have what it takes to stay in Slytherin. You asked me if I belong anywhere at Hogwarts? It's Gryffindor. I belong in Gryffindor. I'm reckless enough. Give me Gryffindor. Not Slytherin.

"You will never belong in Gryffindor," the Hat said, dismissing it offhand, with almost a laugh in that inhuman voice, at the thought of Draco in Gryffindor. "Nor in Hufflepuff. Your loyalty is fierce, yes, but it is Slytherin loyalty, which twists itself to justify almost anything. Loyalty that operates in the dark. Loyalty that is always treachery to another loyalty. In Ravenclaw, perhaps... you *are* gifted at your studies... but when you try to plan, you so often fail, reckless as you say, and act often without the calculation and clear thought of Ravenclaw..."

Not Slytherin, Draco repeated. *Not Slytherin*. *Not Slytherin*. *Not Slytherin*. *If it can't be Gryffindor, then Ravenclaw, please. I got twelve Os on my OWLs, if that isn't enough to qualify me to get into Ravenclaw, I don't know what is. Just not Slytherin*.

The Hat began to go back and forth between Ravenclaw and Slytherin, ignoring thoughts of Gryffindor. Draco's palms had gone clammy, gripping his thighs. His nails began to dig into the fabric of his trousers. He tried not to look up for fear his gaze would go to Theo. He could feel the Hat sorting through every memory, new and old, cutting past his mental shields the way no one and nothing else could in the red line.

Luna is my cousin, and she's a Ravenclaw, he was reduced to pleading. *Please just let me go be with her, she'd be so happy. We fit together, we're so similar, if she's a Ravenclaw then I can be as well...*

"Are you like your cousin," the Hat mused, "Or is she like you? Who has influenced whom-"

If you say anything bad about my cousin, Draco thought sourly, *I'll*- then had to stifle the threat, which seemed too Slytherin. *I want knowledge too, you know*. *I want to know the secrets of the Mirror of Erised. Of the Mirror of Ecidyrue. Of the talon wand, and the Elder Wand, and of all the Deathly Hallows. Whether dark or light, I want the power of those secrets. Isn't Ravenclaw where you go to seek knowledge? It's what I need more than anything, to understand what I'm up against.*

"To understand who you are and why you are here, Draco Malfoy?"

My name, Draco thought fiercely, *Is Draco Lupin Black.*

"And what do you want, *Draco Lupin Black*?"

Draco squeezed his eyes shut more tightly. *What I want most, in this whole world, more than anything, is to understand that word. Dantanian.*

A pause. A long one. And then-

"RAVENCLAW!"

Colovaria

Chapter Notes

Playlist

There were only murmurs, for a long moment, after the hat called Ravenclaw. Then two rather short people jumped to their feet, visible because no one else was standing: Luna in front of Draco, and Flitwick behind. "Welcome to Ravenclaw, Mr. Black!" Flitwick called joyously.

Draco turned to give him one of the most grateful smiles of his life, before running and flinging himself into the arms of his cousin.

After a minute, most of Ravenclaw joined tepidly. Then most of the DA members did, though Draco could only imagine Harry's consternation. Draco might have been upset too, if it had seemed Gryffindor was ever a possibility for the blasted hat.

The rest of the Sorting passed unnoticed by Draco. Luna stroked his hair, letting him lean his head on her shoulder. He shut his eyes, until curiosity made him look in the direction of Gryffindor. He was resolutely pretending Slytherin didn't exist.

Past the Hufflepuffs, Harry was looking over, transparently jealous- not a surprise- while the others were watching the Sorting. Draco gave a sheepish smile, then jerked his head in the direction of Hermione. Harry looked miffed but got her attention. She *had* been the one keeping the time.

Hermione smiled over, making a valiant effort to look pleased for him. She carefully raised her hands to flash both, then three fingers. Thirteen minutes. A proper Hat Stall, but nothing on half an hour. Draco sagged back in relief, as Dumbledore welcomed them to tuck in to the feast.

Draco didn't spend much time watching the high table. He had the bad tendency to assume the professors were talking about him- surely false, even if Severus was in more intensive conference with Flitwick and McGonagall than Draco had ever seen. For the most part, he drew upon Luna as a resource, as she listed the names of every Ravenclaw. She knew them all, even if none of them had ever been particularly friendly to her. That was one of the difficulties of entering this house, apart from reputation preceding him. Here had not been the kindest of homes to his cousin.

When Dumbledore rose, everyone quieted at the sight of his blighted hand. Draco squeezed a distressed-looking Luna's unblemished hand. "He's Dumbledore, he'll be fine," he lied.

The speech itself was unexceptional, apart from the news Severus would take over the DADA post. Draco tried not to smile at Severus's lazy wave and smirk of triumph. He remembered applauding in the blue loop, but he knew better than to show public affection now. Still, inwardly, he couldn't help but be proud.

He hoped Severus was proud of *him*. If it couldn't be Slytherin, it would have been Ravenclaw Severus wanted, right? Compared to the other two...

"Now, as everybody in this Hall knows, Lord Voldemort and his followers are once more at large and gaining in strength," Dumbledore said, ending the furor over Severus's new appointment. "I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dangerous the present situation is, and how much care each of us at Hogwarts must take to ensure that we remain safe. The castle's magical fortifications have been strengthened over the summer, we are protected in new and more powerful ways, but we must still guard scrupulously against carelessness on the part of any student or member of staff."

Carelessness, Dumbledore said, as if everyone within Hogwarts was unimpeachable when it came to *intent*.

Draco could not resist the urge to look at Theo when Dumbledore alluded, however obliquely, to dark forces trying to enter Hogwarts, Severus's promises notwithstanding. But Theo was just listening, and if his eyes hadn't been so shadowed, his face would have worn the same calm intelligent look as if his father was safe at home, sending book recommendations and sake...

"I trust you to conduct yourselves, always, with the utmost regard for your own and each other's safety," Dumbledore was saying. Draco tried not to snort. But Luna caught his unpleasant grimace and prodded his elbow. He forced a smile for her.

"But now, your beds await, as warm and comfortable as you could possibly wish, and I know that your top priority is to be well-rested for your lessons tomorrow. Let us therefore say goodnight. Pip pip!"

Ron and Hermione had to attend to duty as prefects. Draco missed the sight of the Weasley twins too. At least he and Luna had respective boyfriends to come rushing. They ended up holding court at the emptying Ravenclaw table. Harry and Neville hovered, neither looking happy at the outcome of the Sorting.

"I'm sure you're glad you'll have your cousin here, Luna," Neville made sure to say, "And I'm happy for you, but we all would have liked to have Draco in Gryffindor."

"Even Dean and Seamus?" Draco said skeptically, never forgetting how he'd cursed Seamus in first year. Never mind the tension last year, when Seamus had thought Harry a liar.

Neville shrugged. "Dean was bummed you won't be there to talk about football with, and you'll still be banned from our common room." Harry's eyes widened as if he hadn't yet registered that further injury. "But I do think he's happy you won't be hanging up any Arsenal posters next to his West Ham ones."

"What happened?" Harry breathed. "Why would it not- you're *so* brave-"

"I asked it for Gryffindor," Draco said, with an apologetic look at Luna. "It wasn't obliging-"

"Mr. Black." Flitwick was waiting. He had Anthony Goldstein by his side, looking bored. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we should meet in my office."

"Of course," Draco said graciously. "Thank you. I'll see you all later, alright?"

He'd expected to meet, but Goldstein there too was disconcerting. There was something nerve-wracking about his presence, some unease he had never felt during DA meetings.

"Draco," Flitwick began warmly. "I'm thrilled to have you join us in Ravenclaw. I can't imagine a more perfect place for so gifted a student."

"He's very talented," Goldstein agreed, perhaps thinking of Draco showing off his shield against twenty-seven stunners.

Draco supposed that counted as a talent.

His face and build were average enough, but Goldstein had a measured, self-possessed air to him, and an intellectual glint to his eyes below that neat head of dirty blond hair-

Dirty blond.

It made Draco project threat onto him. Especially once Flitwick began calling Goldstein 'Tony' for short, three letters from what Draco feared, issuing orders to the sixth-year male prefect to help Draco settle in. "Your cousin is in Ravenclaw, of course," Flitwick beamed. "Do you know anyone else in this house?"

"I know Draco a little," Goldstein said.

Draco tried to ignore that certain resemblance, but it was hard not to shudder, when Flitwick declared he was sure they would all be fast friends, before sending Goldstein out.

It's not the same as Theo. At the very least, I'm sure I won't end up killing Goldstein's *father.*

Well. Ninety-nine percent sure.

Ninety-five?

Flitwick launched into a spiel about wanting Draco to feel included and welcome. Draco was polite and noncommittal. After establishing Flitwick's door was always open, they entered the meat of things, with Flitwick complimenting his O in Charms. "I hope you intend to continue on in my class, Mr. Black!"

Flitwick seemed fonder of Draco than expected. Draco thought back to showing off charms for Umbridge during Flitwick's review. He *had* seemed relieved after Draco performed well.

What was it Draco told the Kingsnakes when they formed? *Nothing succeeds like success.*

At least it was intelligence that Flitwick seemed to prize, rather than connections, like Slughorn. It made Flitwick a fitting head of Ravenclaw, though Draco was already missing Severus.

"I'm not completely familiar with your academic career to date," Flitwick went on, "So I thought it best we settle on your class schedule now, rather than with the other Ravenclaws, in case there are any issues."

"I sent in my forms." Flitwick got them from a folder originally compiled by Severus. It hurt to see that distinctive slashing handwriting, but Draco forced himself to the matter at hand. "I should be eligible for any class, right? Except the ones I didn't take before..."

"No, you would be welcome as well, I am sure, in Care of Magical Creatures. I would have to speak to Professor Burbage about Muggle Studies, but I would expect so. It is only, for Divination... there is a note here that Professor Trelawney would *not* accept you as a student," Flitwick frowned. "And although Firenze is taking some of the Divination classes this year, Professor Trelawney is the one teaching the sixth-years- oh, and you are banned from the Divination Tower?"

"I didn't want to take it anyway," Draco said hastily.

"I have heard you say you wish to be an Unspeakable, and I would naturally recommend Divination for that. But Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape expressed to me the belief that your ambitions have changed."

"Did Professor McGonagall tell you I don't have *any* ambitions for the future?"

"No," Flitwick said mildly, in a gently placating tone that reminded Draco of Remus. "But is that true, Mr. Black? Do you not have any particular direction you wish to pursue?"

Draco inspected his fingernails. He wished he was with McGonagall if not Severus. He could at least have been more open with an Order member. "I could do anything I want, couldn't I?" He couldn't make himself sound excited about the prospect.

"You need not have everything planned out right away," Flitwick said charitably. "It can be difficult with so many different talents to pick just one. I have been given the impression that your best subjects other than my own are Transfiguration, Potions, and Defense?"

"I was planning to take those, Herbology, Astronomy, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes. That should cover most career bases, right?"

"A full schedule," Flitwick observed. "You will not have many free periods."

"I like a full schedule," Draco said, staring at his fingernails like they held all the secrets of the universe. "Helps me stay busy." *Helps keep me from thinking too much.*

There was no password, nor even a doorknob at the entrance to Ravenclaw Tower. To get there, you had to climb many flights of stairs, including a very vertical spiral staircase up to

the entrance. Draco missed the dungeons, which he almost knew better than Malfoy Manor. But that familiarity would fade in time.

He'd told Flitwick he didn't need help finding the place. It was true, after picking up Luna for various acts of mayhem. But he had never gone inside, and now he was faced with a riddle. Draco's pride didn't let him seek assistance. If he failed, Luna would eventually come looking.

He knocked, a heavy clang, and a melodic voice asked, "What is the origin of evil?"

You have got to be kidding me. A *theodicy* question? He couldn't think of any better way for Ravenclaw to tell him *he* was the intrusion of evil, or at least did *not* belong there.

He could have said *knowledge*, but this was probably the wrong crowd for such talk.

He prepared himself to be wrong. "The absence of good."

"Well-reasoned," the pretty voice said, and the entrance opened.

He had seen the Gryffindor and Slytherin common rooms before. He'd found Gryffindor's comfortable and welcoming, while gauche and gaudy, whereas Slytherin's had all the elegance and dignity that Gryffindor lacked, at the expense of being staid and cold. Ravenclaw had all those merits without the drawbacks. The vast oval-like room gave the impression at first of an observatory, with its dramatic view of the mountains. The Quidditch pitch would be visible from these windows, along with most all the attractions of the Hogwarts. The blue and bronze color scheme was a bit iffy, but he supposed gold and silver had already been taken. Overall, the decor held together, with the silk drapery in the colors fine enough to excuse almost anything.

It seemed an aviary on second look. One that could hold eagles, as well as ravens who were somehow not their mascot. Well, Gryffindors weren't griffins either, nor Hufflepuffs Puffskeins. Only Slytherin were truly accurate- *no, time to get out of that way of thinking. For Salazar's sake- no, for Merlin's sake, Draco, this place is* beautiful.

And so it was. The ceiling was star-painted, turning it at night to more of a planetarium. The midnight blue carpet was in perfect condition, a stark contrast with the polished but uncovered dark stone of the dungeons. It seemed airy, but unlikely to get nearly as cold as the dungeons. There were a number of Ravenclaws gathered around the fireplace nonetheless. They looked up to stare, and Draco ignored them to survey his new domain.

Something was missing.

The underwater teal glow of the lake from surrounding windows.

How many times had Draco stared at that swimming, melted blue glow flickering across Theo's face... not listening to him speak, just watching the effect over his sharp features and deep blue eyes. Perhaps if Theo hadn't been so close to his father, and so obedient on the main to his advisements, he would have ended up in Ravenclaw. It would have suited him.

Draco approached the statue of Rowena Ravenclaw, thinking of the statue of Salazar in the Chamber of Secrets. Smaller, but superior craftsmanship, white marble gleaming as she stood like a sentinel before the dormitories. He half-expected her to spring forward to defend her charges should this snake attempt to make the climb. He had to admire her small circlet and Mona Lisa smile. She had been a striking woman, the room merely emulating her eerie loveliness. You might wound this alabaster woman, even kill her, but you would never lay hand on the secrets inside her mind.

"Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure," Luna observed, "That's what it says on the tiara- Draco! Ooh!" she giggled as he turned and enfolded her in a hug. "I thought I'd give you a chance to look around a bit. What do you think?"

I would have taken a return to Malfoy Manor over sharing a room with Theo again.

"It's all in good taste. But I care more about the occupants. We share a common room now!"

"Yes, we do! And now the Gryffindors can come hang out here if they like. I'll get to see them more too! For one, I imagine *Harry* will be growing far more acquainted with Ravenclaw Tower..." Draco looked over at the many velvet blue armchairs and smiled at the thought of Harry in one of them. Maybe with Draco in his lap- *shut up, libido, Luna is talking.* "And you'll be around to help me get ready for OWLs!"

Draco hoped Hogwarts would remain intact long enough for Luna to *sit* her OWLs.

"I'll be just a dorm room away if you need me," he said companionably, and ruffled her hair. "Not an invitation to invade the boys' dorm. Find a bloke to get me if you like, but I'm not having Luna-Luna looking at anyone's knob. Except Neville's, maybe. *Someday*-"

"DRACO!" she shrieked, clinging to his side, and the warmth that swept through Draco's chest was almost explosive.

It evaporated in the sixth-year boys' dorm, where all five other boys sat together, on a fuzzy white fur rug in front of the unlit fireplace. They were perched whispering fretfully. Draco didn't think it would be paranoia or narcissism to assume at least some of those whispers were about him.

"So," Draco said with false confidence, purposefully planting himself at the edge of their circle. "Let's talk."

Corner scooted back to give him a place in the circle. That was a good sign, even if Corner had only likely been accommodating because he expected Unforgivables if he wasn't.

Or maybe that wasn't it. Next, Corner pompously intoned, "Congratulations on being Sorted to Ravenclaw, Draco. You're now amongst the best and brightest of Hogwarts."

Ginny *had* said this boy had an ego on him. Draco could see why she'd upgraded to Dean Thomas. Good on her, as long as the upgrading stopped there, and she never got her hands on the real prize.

"As is only appropriate," Draco preened.

Cornfoot and Entwhistle exchanged a furtive glance, telling Draco a lot about the social dynamics. Two miniature cliques: that pair, and then the three boys who'd been in DA, Corner, Boot, and Goldstein. He'd have to see how they were split, whether academic achievement from early on, or some newer fissure, from their stances on the war. As it was, Draco technically knew the latter group. He'd have to count on them to facilitate his cohabitation with the former.

"Stop cowering, Kevin," Corner said irritably. "He's not as bad as they say."

Corner seemed the most outspoken and Gryffindorish of the group. It made sense, given his passing resemblance to Harry, with lush longish dark hair and light eyes, if not nearly as handsome or charismatic. He'd been the natural rebound for Ginny from her longtime unrequited crush-

No, Draco should resist the urge to see these new forced companions through the lens of boys he knew better, whether for good or very bad. Even though Kevin Entwhistle reminded him of Neville. That was, Neville had been punched in the face several dozen times, then run over by the Hogwarts Express.

"It would be as hard for me to be *as* bad as they say," Draco drawled, settling back on the comfortable rug with his hands braced behind him, ostentatious in unworriedness. "Boot, Corner, Goldstein, it's good to find myself amidst fellow members of Dumbledore's Army. We won't be continuing those meetings, now that we have a Defense teacher willing to teach Defense, but I'm glad it gave us the chance not to be *complete* strangers. And I assume we'll be continuing on to NEWT classes in many of the same subjects."

From the baffled looks all five exchanged then, it seemed this friendliness was far beyond their expectations. "Yeah, we're really proud to call you a Ravenclaw, Draco," Boot said after a nudge from Corner, sounding practiced.

Cornfoot tentatively pushed his head forward. "Is it true that you got twelve OWLs? And that you got Os on *all* of them?"

"Yes." Draco tried not to seem too smug. He had the feeling Ravenclaw operated on meritocracy, which made objectively more sense than by purity of blood or financial might. Draco's OWLs put him at the top of this intellectual hierarchy.

"That's unbelievable." Goldstein wore a poorly concealed envy. "How did you do it?"

Try being from the future and taking most all those classes twice. Helps.

"We can talk about all that later." Draco checked his watch. "But it's getting late, and we'll be living together, so that's what we have to address." He'd been pleased to see there were six beds now, one with Draco's trunk beneath it. It wasn't a tight fit in the very spacious Ravenclaw Tower. "You've all been sharing for five years, and here I am, inserting myself. So you'll all feel more comfortable if you know what to expect, right?"

"That makes sense," Goldstein agreed, not just prefect but de facto leader. Draco tried to ignore his nerves telling him Goldstein wanted him dead, every time he glimpsed that sandy hair in his peripheral vision. *Frankenstein! There's too many people who* actually *want your head on a pike to start inventing more!*

"Okay. Here's how I operate. The Slytherins I lived with managed to deal with it, so I can't see why you all wouldn't, you're far more intelligent. *Obviously*." It was true collectively, with poor Vince and Greg dragging down the Slytherin average. "No one touches my bed or my possessions. I'm paranoid, keep that in mind. I put a locking and silencing spell on my bed whenever I'm in it. If someone comes to try and get me, I'll hear you telling me from outside, no need to break in. It *would* require blood magic."

There was nervous tittering before they saw he wasn't joking.

"Anyway," Draco went on, eager to get his monologue over with, "No reporting to any of the teachers about my movements, even Flitwick or Snape. You aren't accountable for my actions, and as for house points, I can guarantee I *will* win more than lose them in the long run. I won't do anything dangerous in the dorm, I won't get any of you in trouble, and I envision our relationship as congenial. Collegiate, even. Perfectly civil to all, if I receive civility in return-"

"What do we have to do so you won't curse our tongues?" Cornfoot blurted. His hand flew to his mouth, as if expecting that tongue to be cursed for the temerity of asking.

"Don't talk shit about people I care about," Draco said calmly. "You lot would know better than that, wouldn't you? That includes my cousin Luna. I'm sure at least one of you has called her Loony, if not worse. I'm granting indemnity for past indiscretions, but none *after* this talk. If she has something to say, listen. If she wants you to get me, get me. I am *extremely* protective, and if you do not treat her like a *princess*..."

"We get the idea," Goldstein said hurriedly. "We all like Luna a lot, don't we?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah," the others muttered, after a pointed look from Goldstein.

"Now is your chance to ask any questions you like. Anything on your mind when the Hat put me here. Should I start with what I guarantee that at least one is you is wondering? Yes, I am gay, and no, I will not be watching you change, spying on you, or molesting you in your sleep. I am not interested in any of you. Based on my track record with dormmates, you are far more likely to have me murder one of your family members than proposition you."

The silence that stretched then made Draco wish there was a fire going, for its crackling to offer any noise, as the real elephant in the room reared its ugly head.

"Just a bit of light humor."

Their faces had gone like wax figures.

"Anyway," Draco went on, "Ask me about that if you like, or anything else. You might feel shy, but this is your chance. I won't be as amicable in the future."

When one of them finally spoke- Goldstein, of course- it was not what Draco had expected. "We know you're taken, Draco, don't worry. We all know about you and Harry." His eyes went to the HJP necklace. Draco reflexively touched it, unable to stop from grinning.

"And none of us have an issue with it!" Cornfoot said quickly. "We all love gay people! I mean- not *love*, but not, um, *not* love- er- um-"

All the other boys, including Draco, dissolved into laughter at his expense. For the first time, Draco thought, *This could be okay, being in Ravenclaw. This could work. They're all just* normal.

Goldstein was the one to speak again. "We'll try to remember your name is Black now. But if we call you Malfoy by accident, are we in trouble?"

Are we in trouble, even Goldstein asked, as if Draco was their professor. Well, the discrepancy in power was at least as stark. "No, even I have trouble with that. Though there's an easy fix. Just call me Draco."

"Alright," Goldstein said, "Then call me Tony, everyone goes by first names in Ravenclaw."

One by one, each of the boys formally introduced themselves. "Tony," Draco echoed. "Terry. Michael. Stephen. Kevin." A more white-bread, generic, British set of names had never been heard, but maybe that was for the good. You expected dark wizardry and treachery more from someone with a name like Gellert Grindelwald than your average garden-variety Kevin. "Charmed."

Draco spent an inordinate amount of time at the mirror with his new Ravenclaw uniform on, ignoring the mirror's commentary as he assessed his reflection. Where someone else might have been having an identity crisis, he had more mundane motives. It was like Severus called him. *Vain boy.* He couldn't decide whether the deep Ravenclaw blue suited his complexion, let alone his hair.

Maybe he should have sat with the sixth-year boys at breakfast, but his steps invariably led to Luna. Thankfully, she proved easy enough to move to the sixth-years, if only because she had no friends in her own year.

Sitting with the sixth-years came with its own set of problems, though, starting with Luna's unnecessary frankness, informing Michael Corner that, no, they were not well-acquainted, but yes, she had heard a great deal about him from Ginny Weasley...

Then there were the sixth-year girls. "Er, hey, Padma," Draco said, raising a hand gingerly, embarrassed on Ron's behalf for his treatment of her at the Yule Ball. But she seemed perturbed by his caution, and laughed away the notion she could still be holding a grudge against Ron's friends.

"He only asked me because Hermione Granger was already taken," she said with a shrug. Unfortunately, Luna had ceased terrorizing Michael long enough for her ears to perk up.

"Wait, you think Ron fancies *Hermione*?"

There was no *way* Hermione would buy it hadn't been Draco to put that idea in her head.

Padma delivered her side of the Yule Ball story, much to the interest of Ravenclaws nearby, and some Hufflepuffs as well. "You were there, right?" she finished, smiling at Luna. "I heard Neville Longbottom asked you, but you said no so you could go with your cousin."

"Oh, I said no *then*," Luna said placidly, "But we're dating now. He's very sweet, even if he's not as affectionate as I might like. Oh, there he is!" She waved across the Great Hall. Harry was at Neville's side, and looked over as well. Draco waved, but Harry had a very different air than Neville's half-giddy, half-terrified look. *Draco's* Gryffindor boyfriend looked to be struggling mightily with jealousy, to see Draco at the table in the colors of another house, and still not his own.

Draco could have been amused, if angry wasn't such a damn good look on Harry Potter.

He figured he had a good idea what Harry was angry about. "I'm sorry I'm not in Gryffindor with you," he said, coming over right when breakfast was over. Those green eyes kept darting everywhere but Draco, in a transparent battle with himself to be mature. He didn't even seem to notice the initials necklace, Draco thought with an inner pout. It showed right *above* his Ravenclaw tie, as if HJP was the more potent seal of belonging.

"I have to find out my new timetable with Professor McGonagall. Shouldn't you, with Professor Flitwick-"

"Already did. I have Ancient Runes." That was a bit of a slog. He should get going, even if he was tempted to postpone departure indefinitely, to keep looking at Harry. "I'll see you in Defense after that, I suppose."

"Right," Harry groaned, "Defense with Professor Snape, can't *wait*," and followed the other Gryffindors away.

Draco really *couldn't* wait until Defense with Severus. He was practically bouncing in his seat by the start of class, like Christmas morning under Severus's firefly tree, ready for the story of how Salazar Slytherin stole Christmas- *he'll still tell that to me even though I'm Ravenclaw now, won't he*?

And it was majestic, watching Severus step out and make everyone go almost reverently silent. Just the force of his presence could drain the air from any room.

As for the room... well, Draco remembered his own nonplused reaction to the new decor in the blue loop. The pictures of curse victims, particularly Cruciatus, had hit too close to home, after a summer with Aunt Bella. But now the menacing air just made him grin to himself. It suited Severus so well.

He had sat beside the Gryffindors, though there were plenty of Ravenclaws there, and of course, Slytherins. From his memory of the blue loop, he had shared every class with Theo, plus Theo had taken Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. But this Theo-

He couldn't keep this up. He was obsessing over Theo more than when they were sneaking around together, mentally calculating the time they would spend in the same room. It was just that now, he was hoping now to minimize rather than maximize it. No, he had to try and enjoy Severus's introduction to the class, probably the last one he would ever give.

"The Dark Arts," Severus was telling them, in that mysterious manner only he could pull off, "Are many, varied, ever-changing and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before." Draco smiled, stroking the talon wand in his pocket. It was rather like a hydra, at least in fierceness. "You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible." *And I want to understand the indestructible. I want to understand it all...*

"What is the advantage of a non-verbal spell?" Severus asked, and only Hermione raised her hand. Severus gave Draco a sharp look. With a sigh, Draco's hand joined hers.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy?" Severus asked silkily, only to frown at the whispers and glances exchanged between his students. He must have seen Draco's paled face, and Theo's head on the other end of the room, turning. "Yes, *Draco*?" Severus corrected himself, and of course. Of course Severus would not be willing to use Sirius Black's surname for his godson.

Draco hadn't thought that through, how much it would wound Severus to have Draco written onto the family tree of his worst childhood bully, who'd tried to have him killed when he was younger than Draco was now...

"It's faster and gives more of a surprise, depending on how long the incantation is, the same way quicker and simpler wand motions are useful in dueling independent of their outcome. The more syllables, the more worth the non-verbal has." It was hard to speak glowingly, given how bad Draco was at them. He remembered sulking his way through this class at the back, failing and eventually resorting to cheating, whispering the incantations under his breath. He'd thought such minutiae beneath him, already a full Death Eater. He'd ended up focusing more energy on staring gloomily at the picture of the Cruciatus, in between fitful, filthy musings right in Theo's ear- Salazar, he *had* been a disturbed little sixth-year, hadn't he?

Severus found Draco's answer acceptable and divided them into pairs to practice. Draco immediately snagged Hermione, not wanting Harry to see how bad he was at this. That hardly put a pleased look on Harry's face. When Ron failed to block Harry's first Knockback jinx, it was strong enough to send Ron crashing back into Neville, who let out a shocked *oof* before they both went down. Upon which a disgusted Severus took ten points off Gryffindor for each of the three in turn, for 'incompetence most gross and negligent, though *unsurprising*'.

But Severus didn't take anything off Slytherin when Hermione's Flipendo sent Draco stumbling into Terry- no, wait, he didn't take anything off *Ravenclaw*. The points would have come off Ravenclaw. Draco had to remember that. If Severus showed forbearance now, it was not for his house's sake, but solely his godson's.

This time, Draco did try to apply himself. He had a powerful motivator, once he told himself nonverbal casting might have given an edge against Aunt Bella. Particularly when he cast Langlock. She had known how valuable it would be to reflect it, rather than just absorb. *This is power*. *Irksome as it is, to be so naturally bad at it. This is power if you can grasp it.*

Irritatingly enough, Hermione had it within ten minutes, but Draco had difficulty with both ends, especially casting. Shielding charms, he could do wordlessly against weaker spells, especially if he didn't think about it. But his jinxes, if they came off, were so weak they would barely have hurt Hermione, even if she couldn't have shielded. She was nice enough, though, not to enjoy being so clearly better at one part of dueling than him- him, who had been her supposed dueling *mentor* over the summer. She just tried to quietly advise him at the back of the classroom.

It was hard to focus, when a cursory look over at Blaise and Theo saw Theo casting and shielding wordlessly with just as much ease as Hermione, if not more.

Theo hadn't been *that* good in the blue loop, had he?

He couldn't remember. *Stop driving yourself mad.*

As in the blue loop, Harry managed to get in trouble with Severus on the first day. When Ron failed continually at wordless jinxes, Severus took his place to demonstrate. Harry responded with a very strong, very much not wordless Protego. Draco winced seeing Severus knocked against a desk. It couldn't bring back the best memories, being thrown about by a Potter's spell.

"Do you remember me telling you we are practising nonverbal spells, Potter?"

"Yes," Harry said, sounding remorseless, and Draco couldn't stop himself from intervening. Even if he was pushing it already with Severus, determined to strut around the halls wearing Harry's initials around his neck. Two of which stood for *James Potter*.

"Sir," Draco lied, "I'm excellent at wandless jinxes. Perhaps you could give me the chance to switch partners. He won't use the incantation with *me,* will you?"

Neither looked happy, but Severus nodded. "Very well, Draco." It seemed he was sticking with that unusual designation. "Let us see this wordless jinx you are so *skillful* at."

From that tone, Severus had not failed to notice his ineptitude with Hermione. If Draco was going to insert himself to save *Harry*, Severus seemed content to let Draco embarrass himself.

"Scared, Potter?" Draco eyed him up and down. As consummately unhappy as Harry had looked, his green eyes sparked gorgeously at that taunt.

"You wish," Harry laughed.

"*Without* an incantation, Potter," Severus reminded him. That was admirable charitableness, assuming there would even be a spell to block.

Draco had been counting on himself, or at least the talon wand, to produce under pressure. At first, it seemed he had been wrong, and he was about to start his new career as a Ravenclaw with academic humiliation. But then Draco remembered one time he had definitely managed a non-verbal spell: in that duel with Aunt Bella, to undo Langlock.

It had been life or death, and he'd had to virtually beg his wand for it, but it had worked. He called to mind how that felt, and remembered the sharp acidic palpable taste of the magic. Although, admittedly, he had been poking his wand right into his tongue at the time...

It was not hard to catch the scent of magic around Harry Potter. But Draco focused on his own, honing his senses to the talon wand. In truth, Langlock was easier for *him* than objectively simpler jinxes. And Harry failed to shield completely against it. His hands went to his throat and he glared at Draco in betrayal. Draco raised his wand again. "Finite-"

"No," Severus cut him off. "This *will* ensure Potter cannot use any words. *Again*, Draco. If Potter wishes not to be jinxed, he will produce a wordless shield. Lift Langlock at the *end* of class." Severus was surreptitiously rubbing his hip where it had hit the desk. He looked intent on causing similar pain in Harry. "We shall test your wordless jinxes as well, Draco. Class, come and observe."

Draco wasn't about to disobey, nor hold back too much. Severus would know. "Let us see," Severus intoned, "What the famous Harry Potter can muster once no longer able to *run his mouth.*"

Maybe Harry would have been happier if Draco just let him get detention or something.

Draco gave an apologetic smile. When bid to cast, he raised his wand and strained for a wordless Impedimenta. It came out, albeit feeling weaker than usual. With no shield worth the name mustered by Harry, it still sent him lurching. They had to wait for Harry to recover, and then Severus urged them on again.

Draco couldn't say he didn't take a certain satisfaction from flipping and stinging Harry all over the classroom. Harry looked so *fetching*, with his dark hair even more mussed than usual. It probably didn't say much good that casting curses at his boyfriend made Draco think so much about kissing him. But there was only so much you could do with the blood of House Black *and* House Malfoy. Harry should count himself lucky Draco hadn't thrown in Sectumsempra for a laugh.

"That was exhausting," Draco complained to Hermione, after Severus officially adjourned class. They headed out to the courtyard for break before they had Arithmancy together. He was tapped on the shoulder by Ron, gesturing to an increasingly frustrated-looking Harry.

"Forgetting something, mate?" Ron said, more amused than sympathetic.

"Sorry," Draco said, "Finite incantatem," and Harry gasped a proper breath.

"Why did you have to cast *Langlock*?" were Harry's first husky words.

Because I was the most confident it would work, and I wouldn't have to stand there in front of my godfather trying to cast in vain like a bloody Squib. "I thought it would help you," Draco lied. "No temptation to use your words then, right? And you did manage a wordless shield."

"Once," Harry complained. "Only once. How many times did you jinx me before then?"

Draco considered, refusing to apologize. "I don't know. Ron, do you?"

"Lost count," Ron said contentedly, slumping down beside Hermione onto the grass.

Draco was saved by the arrival of some sycophantic Gryffindor, bearing a message from Dumbledore about impending lessons for Harry. The Gryffindors began to speculate about what they might be. Draco had to fight back the temptation, to advise Harry to enjoy the time with Dumbledore he had left. But Harry seemed hardly able to focus, shooting adorably resentful little looks in Draco's direction.

"Did you *really* ask the Hat to give you Gryffindor?" Harry asked apropos of nothing, cutting Ron off mid-sentence. Ron opened his mouth in protest, and Hermione just held up a hand.

"Of course I did. I wasn't *lying*-"

"You're sure? You seemed pretty happy to end up with your cousin! And then to curse me as much as your godfather would let you-"

Draco considered his boyfriend, then reflected that publicly being in a relationship had to have some perks. He laid a hand on Harry's thigh, where he was sat cross-legged on the grass, and Harry broke off mid-word. "It was between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw," Draco lied through his teeth, "But the Hat couldn't get past twelve Os on my OWLs, it wasn't *my* fault. Now, do you want to dwell on a few jinxes in the distant past-"

"The distant past of five minutes ago," Ron laughed to Hermione. Her big brown eyes sparkled at him, covering her mouth to keep from laughing.

"Or do you want to have a *private* word before Arithmancy?" Draco drawled. When he got up and strode shamelessly to the edge of the courtyard, Harry wasn't slow following.

"You're such a bastard," Harry hissed. But when Draco drew him into a kiss behind the statue, he didn't do a thing to stop him. On the contrary, his hands were interested in nothing but taking control of the kiss, turning Draco to flatten his back against the rough stone.

The feeling of Harry pushing him and sealing their lips sent tremors all through him, stomach full of butterflies at the force. "I hate it," Harry breathed, "When you use Langlock," and kissed Draco so hard, people behind the statue had to hear the sound of their lips pressing together.

Draco smirked, then stuck his head out from behind the statue. "Striker, I'm going to be late to Arithmancy!" he called cheekily before Harry dragged him back, hands sliding down to Draco's hips. Draco wound his arms around Harry's neck and kissed him back thoroughly, licking Harry's mouth open. "Mmm... let's see, have you *recovered* from the Langlock?" he

purred, and licked all around Harry's mouth and along his recently cursed tongue, intertwining it with his.

He let a low whimper out as Harry's tongue curled, eager and open-mouthed and filthy. A month of daily practice had really made Harry much better at this. "You twisted little dragon," Harry whispered, "Did you get off on hexing me to kingdom come? You are so-"

Draco put on an innocent look, sticking out his lower lip. "Well, dragonslayer, if you're *complaining,* I'd be happier discussing Arithmancy with Hermione anyway-"

He pretended to try to leave, making Harry grab him and kiss him breathless again, groaning when Draco dragged his teeth experimentally over Harry's tongue. "I can still kiss you fine," he whined. "My tongue isn't..."

"Let's see... doesn't seem *too* affected," Draco panted, "But it's a little clumsy," and laughed as Harry bit vindictively at his lower lip, tugging it out with his teeth. He let his hands slide up into Harry's messy hair, getting it that much more messed up. He enjoyed that when they pulled back for breath, and seeing Harry's lips kissed that bit much darker.

Bloody hell, he's amazing. And I get to have his initials *on me.*

"Clumsy? Do I still," Harry hissed sulkily, "Kiss like a Dementor," and Draco rested their foreheads together, feeling a rush like off some rare expensive whisky, those lips and those hands... the proximity of that warmth, that smell, his Harry, his...

Harry kissed him when he didn't answer, all tongue. Draco pressed closer to stifle his moan, one foot bracing his weight as the other slid up the back of Harry's calf, ankle coiling there.

"I don't know," Draco whispered. "Do I kiss like a Ravenclaw now?"

"I don't know," Harry muttered, "How a Ravenclaw kisses," and Draco put on a thoughtful expression, trying not to look too giddy. Even if it felt like his veins were having their blood drained out to be replaced with sunlight.

"But surely you spent a fair amount of time," Draco mused facetiously, "Imagining how Cho Chang must kiss," and laughed at Harry's burdened sigh.

"How many times do I have to tell you-" Harry began, and then gave up and just gave him a firm series of pecks, each one pressing their bodies closer together.

"I have a free period," Harry whispered, voice full of meaning. When Draco didn't answer, he knotted his hand in Draco's new blue tie and tugged, forcing Draco's eyes up to those electric green ones, and the sweaty tousled hair that exposed the lightning scar.

"I don't," Draco said, putting on all the nonchalance on the world. He wiped his mouth, redid his tie, and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek before stepping out from behind the statue. He only had to run a little in order to catch up with Hermione on her way to Arithmancy.

Severus's last class of the day before dinner was third-year Ravenclaws, innocuous enough that Draco had no fear of sneaking his way into the Defense classroom as soon as all the little buggers were gone. Until that third-year designation made him realize what the classroom could contain. "Tell me there aren't any Boggarts in here yet?"

"If I say there are," that ever-cranky, ever-lovable voice groused from the back of the room, "Will my burdensome godson leave me alone?"

Draco ran over to Severus in such happiness, he might have indeed braved the presence of Boggarts. "So I'm still your godson? Even if I'm a Bla- not a Malfoy, and not in your house anymore, and..."

"Of course I am still your godfather," Severus said irritably, striding to the front desk and making Draco follow at his heels like an eager duckling. "Did anyone say otherwise? Although I only consider myself *Draco's* godfather. I am no godfather to a Lupin or *Black*-"

That was all the cue Draco needed to show off. "Look!" he said excitedly, pulling out a bottle full of molten gold. "Look what I won in Potions from Slughorn!"

"Felix Felicis. Is he still giving that out as a present for the best performer, on the first day of NEWT classes?" Little question who must have won that prize when Slughorn had been *Severus's* professor. "I should not have thought you so elated, given that you and your cousin received a retrospectively *far* too generous present of this substance, one Christmas-"

"We already took it all," Draco said breezily. "Anyway, I used the way you taught me in our extra potions lessons- not like the book said, your way was different, but it worked way better-"

"Then what are you bragging for, vain boy, if your greater share of success was due to *better information*? I had thought you had gotten past that in life, crowing and self-aggrandizing because you had better *connections*. And when and why exactly have you and Miss Lovegood already used up all of the Felix Felicis?"

"The day of the Third Task?" Draco asked weakly. At Severus's bewildered look, he mumbled, "We took it all really early in the morning. It wore off by the time fake Moody got to me."

"You *will* use this share more wisely."

Draco hardly wanted to admit he was considering just giving it over to Harry. It wasn't like he could say Harry was meant to win it according to the blue loop. "I do everything wisely," Draco said brightly, "Now that I'm a Ravenclaw."

Severus's mouth twisted. "Proud of that, are you?"

Draco's mood abruptly plummeted down lower than the dungeons. "I wouldn't want to leave your house if I had a choice, Severus. I wouldn't have wanted *them* to adopt me if you were an option. I wanted to come live with *you* for years now, you know that, I asked every summer. They're my family, but *you're* my real *father*-"

"Enough of sentiment," Severus said briskly. But Draco thought he looked pleased at this genuine admission by his godson's. That gratification sent Draco's insides into a panic, threatening respiratory difficulties, merely with the all-too-common thought, *I can't, I can't, I* can't *let him die.*

"I won't keep you, Severus. I know we probably shouldn't be seen together as much- if you're going to keep up... you know... and I can't visit as much. But I thought, we should at least set up, like, I don't know, an official weekly check-in- don't glare at me like that, don't you want to stay apprised of the affairs of your beloved godson?"

"I think," Severus said silkily, "The *affairs* of my godson are more likely to *nauseate* me." His gaze fell to the initials at Draco's throat.

Draco hid self-consciousness with a cocky smile. "Didn't keep me from wiping the floor of your new classroom with Potter, did it?"

Severus's face went blissful at the reminder. "Oh, it did not," he agreed dreamily.

Draco took that moment of zen to establish a weekly Sunday morning check-in. And Severus did not try to argue very hard against it, which from him was as enthusiastic agreement as you could get.

That had Draco's mood soaring. Between this rare affirmation of his importance to Severus, and the taste from kissing Harry in the courtyard lingering on his lips, he found himself uncharacteristically optimistic about the future. He sent off for Ravenclaw paraphernalia, real ties and the like. For most of his possessions, though, it was time for transfiguration. He carried a large bag down to his new common room, to begin the process of turning green to blue.

Luna insisted on helping, though Colovaria was not a charm she had technically learned yet. He only trusted her on his less valued items at first. Once she proved a good hand, though, he let her work on everything, even silk and cashmere. She managed to get his sets of silk pajamas, for one, perfectly Ravenclaw blue, before he went to bed. And even if he didn't get to kiss Harry goodnight anymore, at least he got to give a goodnight hug to Luna, with the impression that she would be expecting one nightly from her favorite cousin.

Tuesday brought Herbology, Charms, Potions again, Transfiguration, and Double Astronomy. His schedule hardly lightened for the rest of the week. As predicted, he was soon too busy to do much thinking. But he made time to go see Dobby in the kitchens, and recount everything about their respective summers. He didn't have the courage to inquire after the fate of Dobby's Kingsnakes hoodie, let alone his relationship with Wooky and Nissy. From the way they stayed far away, glancing over whispering behind their hands, he didn't have to ask.

He gave Dobby a firm hug, and then disappointed Dobby yet further by admitting he had no intention of trying out for Ravenclaw's Quidditch team. He offered a non-Quidditch Ravenclaw hoodie for Christmas if he liked.

Dobby hesitated. "Dobby would like to show his support for Draco Black. But Dobby thinks that in his heart, Dobby is a Gryffindor."

Wooky and Nissy's stares burned into the backs of their heads at that. But Draco could only shake his head laughing and agree.

He begged off a Ravenclaw group homework session for Defense on Wednesday night, falsely claiming a headache. He went instead to the Slytherin tryouts, with the help of Harry's map and invisibility cloak. He'd claimed he needed them in order to scope out the Room of Requirement and assess the damage. He did intend to eventually, but first, to see what became of the Kingsnakes. He wanted to see Millie in the hoops.

She wasn't. The results were not pretty. No girls were even trying out. He didn't know if that was because of a dictate from NEWT-flunking captain Montague, or a more general counterreaction against the person who'd integrated the team, given what else Draco had done to fellow Slytherins. Millie, Pansy, Astoria: all three female parts of a historically successful Slytherin team were not even at tryouts. Meanwhile, all the players who had quit last year and were still at Hogwarts had come back. The selection of players, especially the ones Montague was watching and favoring more, seemed to be the bulky bruiser type. Well, the blue loop's sixth year had been a disastrous Quidditch season for Slytherin. And Draco wished them only ill this time.

That was- almost all of them. Vince and Greg, the sole hold-outs, he found he could not wish ill, no matter how much he thought he should now. It was *Vince and Greg.*

Ill, though, seemed likely for all, given the absence of Theo. Draco had wondered whether Theo would keep playing. The fact that he was nowhere to be seen made Draco's misgivings grow all the worse.

He sat out by himself in the dark for some time after tryouts ended.

It was Tony, Michael, Terry, and Luna with him that weekend, as he stood above his last green item: his Kingsnakes hoodie. "I can't," Draco breathed, soft enough for only Luna to hear.

She ran a reverent hand over its well-loved texture. Incredible, to think how much Draco must have worn it over just a few months, to make it so soft. "You're not destroying it," she said softly. "Just changing the color and erasing the words."

Draco shook his head mutely and she smiled. "Do you want me to do it?"

When he nodded, she cast Colovaria. The deep green turned to a deep Ravenclaw blue, looking just as comfortable a hue as the old one. After a quick whispered consultation, she cast Colovaria again, with a slow, careful wave of her wand over the letters. MALFOY in silver turned to BLACK in bronze on the back, and the sixth-years gave her an appreciative

applause. She turned over the hoodie, waved her wand over the front, and the silver snake and all the lettering on the front bled and coiled together, until it became a bronze eagle.

"See?" Luna said softly, handing him back the hoodie. "It's not gone. Just different."

Written by the Victors

Chapter Notes

Playlist

1. *Destroy the vanishing cabinet at Hogwarts if it's the last thing you ever do.*
2. *Ensure there are no other ways to secretly enter Hogwarts.*
3. *Get sorted into Gryffindor.* (Already crossed out, changed to *Don't get sorted into Slytherin.* Check.)
4. *Get Severus to quit being a spy and keep him alive.*
5. *Keep Remus, Sirius, Harry, Hermione, Ron, Luna, Dobby, and Neville alive too.*
6. *Don't let Harry out of your clutches.*
7. *Improve at dueling, you suck at it so bad it's not even funny.*
8. *Win your mother over to your side.*
9. *Don't kill anyone.*
10. *Kill Aunt Bella.*

There was the list Draco had made, written out in big proud letters as if all self-evident. But he frowned at the last two items, not knowing how he hadn't noticed the contradiction there. He had thought his mind was so collected and resolute these days, but it must be more scattered than ever, to make such logical errors. He crossed out *Kill Aunt Bella*, and tried to think of an item to replace it. Then he realized the biggest items he had missed.

10. *Figure out about the Deathly Hallows.*
11. *Figure out about the Mirror of Ecidyrue.*
12. *Figure out about Dantanian Noir.*

He could set at the list that night, heading to the Room of Requirement on the seventh floor, though it was long past curfew. At least Harry didn't currently have the Marauder's Map, to look and see him on it. Not that Harry would be watching his map, following Draco's movements like some kind of stalker. Just the idea was crazy.

He stood outside the door, finding the wall uniform, perfectly repaired since Umbridge's invasion of the room. *I need to see the vanishing cabinet. I need to see the vanishing cabinet. I need to see the vanishing cabinet.* Nothing happened. He was left pacing outside the Room of Requirement for quite some time, wondering if it simply didn't work, before he

remembered he had been the one to take the cabinet there in the blue loop. His mind was definitely not working as it should be.

He had the cloak and the map, at least, to shield him from sight after curfew, as he skulked down to the first floor. The vanishing cabinet had been left there, with a sign not to go in after Montague's misadventures in it. The thought of those misadventures make Draco think once again how much he missed the Weasley twins at Hogwarts. Whereas getting a good look at the cabinet reminded Draco exactly how much he had once *hated* this thing. Yet here he was, carefully levitating it up staircases, unable to use the cloak or the map. He was repeating history with this transport, not to succeed at the same project, but to destroy any chance of its recurrence. It would have gone smoothly, if Draco had managed not to drop the cabinet halfway up a moving staircase.

"Bloody hell!" Draco yelped as part of it grazed his foot, and then he heard voices. Ravenclaw voices.

"Tony, did you hear that? Was that someone on the staircase?" Draco vaguely recognized the girl's voice without knowing whose it was. Probably Padma Patil's, if these were patrolling prefects.

"I'll go check," Tony told her, "You go back to the third floor, we haven't swept there." Footsteps, Patil's receding and Tony's advancing. Draco thought to cast a Disillusionment charm for himself and his massive black walnut cabinet, like an invisible Sisyphus with his stone. But he only had time to draw his wand before the moving staircase delivered itself to Tony's feet.

"Hey," Tony said, rather calmly given the strangeness of the sight before him. Or maybe that was forced calmness, from having the talon wand anywhere near in his direction. "Draco, I thought I heard you there. What's up?"

Draco acted on instinct. They were fellow Ravenclaws now, weren't they? And if house spirit wouldn't motivate their prefect, maybe fear of Draco's displeasure when they had to share a dorm all year would. It was a piece of luck, to have the prefect that caught him be one vulnerable to him.

"It's DA business," Draco hissed. "Order of the Phoenix business. I'm taking it to the Room of Requirement. Be quiet and *help* me!" He didn't let Tony get away with a second time questioning it. "Whose side are you on? Come on, I'll explain once we're inside."

Tony obeyed without a word. That made it easier work levitating the cabinet up the remaining staircases to the Room of Requirement, before they set it down for Draco to open the Room. Draco paced past three times, thinking, *I need a place to stow the cabinet before I destroy it.* The door appeared to a room full of nothing but broken and wrecked things, almost like a landfill but with the smell of rotted wood rather than mere trash, the detritus of centuries piled up in a vast expanse the size of the Department of Mysteries. But they only needed to get it in past the door. It would be safe from view there, for Draco to do his work on it.

"Okay, what's going on?" Tony asked, frowning at the unceremonious way Draco dropped the end of it he was levitating. The P badge gleamed on his chest, with the room's bright, harsh light. The brighter the better, for thorough destruction.

Draco took a deep breath. "I haven't told anyone this, okay? Not the Gryffindors or my cousin, not the professors... a Slytherin came to me on the train, and told me there's a plot with this cabinet. There's a duplicate of it in Borgin and Burkes in Knockturn Alley. Have you heard of it?" Goody-two-shoes Goldstein shook his head. What a life he must have lived to never have even *heard* of Borgin and Burkes. Draco supposed he should consider himself lucky that Tony had even heard of *Knockturn Alley.* "The idea is to create a passage between the two, so they can use it to get Death Eaters through into Hogwarts."

"Merlin," Tony breathed, sinking down onto a broken concrete bench. It held his weight, but part of it lurched down diagonally. He didn't seem to notice, staring at the cabinet mesmerized. "Is it Nott?"

Draco scoffed. "You think after what I did, *Theodore Nott* is trying to sneak me intelligence?"

"No," Tony explained, "I mean, is it Nott who's trying to let the Death Eaters in?" He smiled at Draco's shocked look. "It stands to reason, doesn't it? Three boys whose fathers are Death Eaters, and it sounds like a complicated thing to do. You wouldn't charge Crabbe or Goyle with that, no offense. Not to mention- he's got a motive to fight for that side, doesn't he?" He paused, assessing in that detached Ravenclaw way. "Why are you keeping this so secret?"

"Because," Draco said tightly, "The more people who know, the more likely it is that the Slytherin who told me will get found out." He hoped word of him getting intelligence from a Slytherin wouldn't spread after this, or Millie might well be fucked, from no fault of her own.

"Okay. So if we destroy it, they can't get into Hogwarts that way, that's the idea? Then we'll have to be sure to destroy it properly." Tony frowned when Draco raised his wand. "How much do you know about the foolproof destruction of magical objects? We should do some research before just throwing curses at it like idiots."

Draco thought that harsh, but he remembered his adventures with the wall in front of Severus's fireplace, the Mirror of Erised, and a certain other mirror before that. He had to concede the boy had a point. Draco was a bit too liable to throw curses first and ask questions later.

"Fine," Draco said tightly, "But we can't wait long. And you're helping me figure this out. If you tell anybody-"

"I won't have a tongue to tell them with, right?" Tony said, nothing but friendly and likable. "I'll escort you back to Ravenclaw. If anyone asks about it, I'll say I came and got you myself, to help with a corridor I thought was cursed."

"Not a bad lie," Draco commented as they walked down the sets of stairs together. "Why are you helping me, though?"

Tony looked at him like he was crazy. "What do you mean? You just told me that thing could let Death Eaters into Hogwarts! As if I want that to happen! Me and Michael and Terry, we joined DA for a reason. We wanted to be able to defend ourselves if there's a threat. Not sit idly by and wait to be killed. Or to have to fight alone. That's how you are, right? But you don't have to do this by yourself."

"I wouldn't usually," Draco said guardedly. "I'd at least tell my cousin. Keeping this secret- is just to protect the Slytherin who told me about it, like I said..."

"I get that," Tony said, "And I promise I won't tell." He doubled down at Draco's skeptical look. "Really! Not because I have any fondness for anyone in Slytherin. You were there long enough to know that. Just that if they're willing to give up intelligence once, they could be willing to give up more. Maybe even *better* intelligence. It's escalation, right? Once you get your foot in the door, the other person becomes gradually more willing to let you in further."

"You mean like habituation," Draco said neutrally, "Or desensitization." Sounded like the process of getting used to committing violence and atrocities. He supposed betrayal could very well operate on the same principle, a little and then all at once. It might have in his own experience. "You wanna take the riddle?"

"No," Tony said, watching him with that analytical look again. "Go ahead."

Draco tried not to get stage fright as he stepped up to the eagle knocker, and the melodious voice asked him, "What is the most deadly thing to put on a man's head?"

That was easy. "A crown," Draco said, although he might have also said, *A lightning scar.*

"Well-reasoned," said the knocker, and let him inside.

Nothing came of his discovery by Tony, except for Tony's assistance. It seemed that despite his natural suspiciousness, he could to take Tony's help as well as secrecy at face value. If Harry noticed Draco suddenly spending a very large amount of secretive time with his most attractive new dormmate, well, Draco would probably enjoy the eventual results of that jealousy, now that he had such physical means of managing that strong emotion. It made him tingle just to imagine.

It was only a few days of research before Tony declared them ready to take on the vanishing cabinet. They headed together a bit after dinner to the Room of Requirement. They found the cabinet just as they had left it, though a part of Draco had feared someone, Theo or another, would have located it and moved it out of their reach.

Tony stood by watching, ready to shield himself, as Draco ripped it to pieces, removing the protective enchantments before transfiguring the wood to a more brittle quality. He cast Expulso, Reducto, and Confringo in turn, and used Ninguifors to turn the wooden splinters to snow, snow he then melted and dried over piles of other discarded wood, before repeating the process twice more, and then he gave it some jets of fire for good measure. Tony learned the

Ninguifors charm for his troubles. Draco left that night with security that whatever came this year, even if it was Death Eaters at Hogwarts, it would not be through the vanishing cabinet.

Other than a rather more handsy, possessive Harry, who had indeed noted Draco's sneaking about, the only ramification was increased friendliness towards Draco from Tony, as if joining him in secret illegal magic projects was the perfect grounds to make a friendship- which, granted, in Draco's experience with Ravenclaws had proved true. Tony was so much a Ravenclaw through and through, it made it easier to discard the superficial resemblance to Theo in his mind.

Draco ended up hanging out with the Ravenclaw boys that weekend, or rather, the higher-rent clique of them, Tony, Terry, and Michael, though he found Michael rather irritating. As was only natural, for someone who had spent that many months willingly going out with Ginny Weasley. Especially without the Freudian need to insert himself as a Weasley brother-in-law, or the still more Freudian attraction to the nearest woman remotely resembling his deceased mother. But Michael was bearable, at least, when he was listening to Draco's stories with obvious thrill.

"The attack on the Citadelle Xaphan," Draco explained, "That was just Dementors, not Death Eaters. Only a few Death Eaters came, and that was to kidnap Harry."

"But the entire Order of the Phoenix was there, right?" Terry asked skeptically. "*They* couldn't handle the Dementors?" The Ravenclaws had demanded the story of the attack in a break from studying, stretched out in the Transfiguration courtyard on a lazy Saturday afternoon. Draco had been too languid and sleepy after football with Hermione, Dean, and Seamus to resist the Ravenclaw questions too much. He gave them the narrative with a series of yawns.

"There were also gargoyles," Draco said, and half-laughed, half-yawned, mouth gaping like a lion's roar. "What, they didn't have that in the papers?" The Ravenclaws shook their heads. "The Death Eaters cast a spell. Piertotum Locomotor. It activated the statues and suits of armor to come alive and fight in defense of the castle. They all attacked the wedding. A lot of them could fly. They were winged demons with real bellows in their hands..."

The boys looked awed and intimidated, though Terry was nodding. "That makes sense, like Xaphan," he said thoughtfully. "That's the legend of Xaphan, right? He was a lesser fallen angel, but he's the one who had the idea to set heaven on fire on their way out of it. So of course those would be angels with *bellows.* They make fire," he added to a confused-looking Michael.

"I know what bellows are!" insisted a red-faced Michael, who seemed to have known no such thing.

"Oh, of course," Draco said. "I just didn't think it was important. Unless you aren't interested in hearing about the rest of the attack..." That silenced them. He was beginning to enjoy having a rapt audience, unfamiliar with the details of his 'heroism'. Wasn't it a Muggle saying, *History is written by the victors*?

"So anyway, Citadelle Xaphan was pretty broken-down to start with. The statues wrenching themselves from the stone caused a lot of structures to crumble, falling rock like an avalanche. Some fell on Harry and pretty much knocked him out, that's how he got kidnapped. It would have hit me, but I had on a protective amulet. Black opal, it shielded me. So I made the Dementors leave with a Patronus-"

"Yours is a dragon, right?" Michael said. Draco nodded, though he had a sudden fear he was being watched. But anxiety often gave him that hunted feeling, so he ignored it.

"Yeah. But I saw Harry taken, so I went to the tower where the Death Eater had cast the spell to turn the citadel against us. When I made it up, sure enough, it was a Black." He paused for dramatic effect. "It was Bellatrix Lestrange, and she-"

"No it wasn't, Grindelwald. It was your mother on the tower."

Theo was standing above them, face perfectly blank. Their eyes locked, with the other Ravenclaws jerking back, Tony leaping to his feet. As well he would, as Draco had fabricated a plot by Theo to let Death Eaters in. It had just been such a natural lie in the moment, and he'd gotten into the habit of always taking the natural lie. But Merlin, Draco just couldn't stop fucking over Theodore Nott, could he?

"Theo," Draco said tightly. "Theo, I didn't mean- you shouldn't have to hear-"

He felt as lamentably helpless as he ever had, as the Ravenclaws regarded Theo and then Draco with none of Draco's paralysis of guilt. Michael brashly asked, "Draco, is that true? Was it Bellatrix Lestrange, or was it Narcissa Malfoy?"

Draco couldn't look away from that hollow look in Theo's once-lively eyes, face thinner than in June. The warmth that usually animated it when addressing Draco was as dead as his father.

"Bellatrix Lestrange," Draco lied, and Theo left without a word.

It was much the same feeling as at Madam Malkin's with his mother, watching him walking away, a shower in jagged pieces of ice. Here was the knowledge Draco should be frightened, by the small nothing passed between him and someone he had grievously wounded. Except he did not know for *whom* he should be frightened- himself, or the person he had left behind...

"Theo!" Draco called, but Theo's back didn't slow in its retreat. "Theo!"

Theo disappeared around the corner, and Draco ran after him. Theo's steps sped, taking him down the steps and down more, until they were in the dungeons, where Draco should not have gone. Theo was not running, just walking quickly. But when he turned into the Slytherin labyrinth, he should have been able to lose Draco with ease. Except Draco cast Homenum revelio and followed the blue outline.

Theo's steps had been leading towards the entrance to Slytherin, but Draco trapped him in a barren black corner before they were near it.

"Theo," Draco said intently, "Theo, listen to me, I didn't mean for you to hear that."

"What," Theo said tunelessly, the usual intelligence and calculation remaining on that handsome face, seen from up close. But it was suppressed, more veiled on his face than even the pain there, behind a thin veneer of impassivity. "Go on. Don't let me stop you. Go on bragging to your new friends about the day you killed my father."

The words were worse than a real dagger- than a *black* dagger- out of those lips that Draco had kissed so many times, long before he betrayed them, not that Theo would ever know that. "It was to save my uncle. He had him stunned on the ground and he was casting Avada Kedavra-"

"So it's true, it *was* to save Sirius Black," Theo echoed, a dangerous kind of dullness in his eyes. "But you could have *stunned* my father. You didn't have to cut him open-"

"He was trying to kill my uncle-"

"So you say," Theo said, calm at first, but his voice began to break apart as his thoughts spilled out. "You're the best liar I've ever met. Then why is it no one else on either side was killed, not even by the Dark Lord, save for my father, save for by *your hands*? I just- I just don't understand why it was him! I know it was wrong- know he shouldn't have been there- I know he was wrong, he shouldn't have been there, shouldn't have been a Death Eater, I didn't *want* him there, but there was so many people, why him, why was *he* the one who had to die? Grindelwald, was it- was it *because* he was my father? Was it because of me that you- I don't know what I'm supposed to do if- how I'm supposed to go on if it was my fault, if you killed him because I-"

Draco didn't know how Theo would have finished that sentence. *Because I loved you?*

Whatever it had been, Theo bit it back, visibly struggling to control the tempest seething within. But the wild desperate spite seemed impossible to contain, whether towards Draco or himself, roaming like a small fist beneath the skin of his face, twitching. "Never mind. You can lie better than most people tell the *truth.* Just tell me one thing."

"Theo, I'm sorry- please listen, I'm *so* sorry about your father- I was going to write you, I know I should have, but-"

"Shut your mouth," Theo hissed, eyes flaring, and he moved very quickly. In a second, he had his wand drawn and Draco pushed against the wall. It was pressing into Draco's jugular, Theo's face contorted in unconceivable rage, so much in his gaze it was a wonder it wasn't corroding his heart right out of his chest. "*Liar*!"

For the first time, awfully, doubt crept into Draco's head whether Nott had really been speaking the words Avada Kedavra, or he had heard wrong. It wasn't like Stupefy sounded anything like Avada Kedavra. But other incantations did. *Would* Draco have been able to hear anything from the distance he had been, in a vast loud hall full of chaos and confusion? Had he even imagined it? Could he have just heard what he *expected* to hear, because he knew Sirius was murdered in the blue loop that night?

He probably wouldn't have cast Sectumsempra if it hadn't been the spell already on his lips, readied for Aunt Bella.

"Theo," was all Draco could say, and Theo's wand jabbed in harder, though Draco was making no attempt to draw his own. He should have been. Theo had sent him a black dagger, even if Draco had his suspicions about whose idea it had been. That would also explain why Theo knew it had been Mother at the citadel, and even why Theo was certain his father *hadn't* been going to kill Sirius. The only people nearby had been Draco, Nott, Sirius, Bellatrix- *if he's spoken to Bellatrix, if she heard what Nott was saying, if she said something to Theo about it- but she could have lied- if-*when *she helped him send the black dagger, chose that word whore that never sounded like Theo at all- no, I'm going mad-* but yes, there could have been Bellatrix to hear, or-

Remus. Remus would have told him if it hadn't actually been Avada Kedavra, right?

Remus, none too close, and half-unconscious from trying to climb over the body of Dolohov to reach his felled husband- if he hadn't just taken Draco's word for it-

The world was falling out from beneath him. Theo could very well kill him here and now. They were in the right place to do it, and it was what Theo's black dagger had essentially promised. But as Theo told him to be quiet, there was no Killing curse, not on Theo's lips, nor even the Cruciatus, which Draco had honestly been expecting at this point. There were no words at all on those familiar lips before him, only tears, dripping down from liquid midnight eyes over Theo's face like a sudden rainfall, nothing and then streaming all at once, silently without sobs, face melting open. His shoulders shook, muscles tight with the effort of holding back his shaking. Draco's instincts ludicrously told him to hug Theo, to comfort him, as if wasn't him and no one else who had not just broken Theo's heart, but broken his life.

Theo's wand slackened against Draco's neck, though there was likely already some indentation left there. "Just tell me," Theo gasped through his tears. "I haven't been able to sleep a single night since you killed my father, Draco, because I haven't known, and I was hoping it wasn't true but I knew it *was* true but- but- the pendant, the pendant you were bragging about to those Ravenclaws- was that the one I gave you for your birthday, enchanted for *you*? The one you gave your cousin, that you wouldn't have worn, that *I* told you to take back and wear for the wedding, that morning-"

Theo must *not* have known the attack was coming, to have done that.

Draco would have lied, if Theo hadn't already heard him say too much to believe it.

"Yes, Theo," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

Theo took a shuddering breath, wiping uselessly at his wet eyes with a jerk of his hand like a convulsion. The last vestige of hope on his face had been extinguished, like a flame inside a hand. Then he stepped back, still holding his wand out to protect himself from Draco, and ran.

Draco leaned against the wall, covering his face. He felt himself sinking, as he tried to convince himself that Nott had really been casting the Killing curse, when Draco sliced him

open and left him to bleed to death alone.

When Severus finally opened the door, he found Draco sitting on the ground. "When we began these Sunday morning check-ins," Severus said crossly, "One had never anticipated the *early* morning." It was past noon. "Should you not be at some ghastly meal or other, vain boy?" He drew his long black dressing gown tighter, evidently roused from sleep. He squinted down sleepily. "What has happened? What is wrong with you *now*?"

"I'm sorry," Draco mumbled, "I couldn't wait."

Severus rubbed his eyes, leading Draco in drowsily. "You missed supper last night as well," he observed. "Do you intend to starve- oh, of course, your associate from the kitchens," he sighed, as Dobby popped in and began to set a table with a lavish breakfast in front of Severus's fire.

Severus disappeared into his bedroom to dress. Draco sat down and tore into the breakfast, making listless small talk with Dobby until Severus came back. Dobby cordially greeted Severus and popped out. Severus made a hazy grimace once Dobby was gone. "To what do I owe this displeasure? Really, Draco, I had hardly envisioned this as a commitment to Sunday *brunch*-"

"Only Muggles talk about brunch," Draco said with nervous energy, stalling incoherently. "Mrs. Granger goes out and brunches with her lady friends. You know all about football too- how do you always know my Muggle references?"

Severus frowned, though he seemed gratified to have some hot strong tea to fortify himself. "You do know I am a half-blood, of course."

A dull humiliation went through Draco. "No, I didn't. I mean, I knew you didn't grow up well-off- that you weren't in the Sacred Twenty-Eight- I thought *that* was why Father was never that enthusiastic that Mother named me your godfather..."

"Why did you think my old school notebook," Severus said impatiently, "Read *property of the Half-Blood Prince*?"

Draco blinked. "I thought that was some reference to Tom Riddle."

"I am a half-blood," Severus said coldly, "And if I had known your parents had not told you, I would have informed you long ago. If my blood status is disenchanting to you, I suggest you look to your own amatory pursuits for reference as to what should be your opinions on the subject. Now if you intend to launch into some form of lamentations about *not knowing me at all* or other such nauseating tripe, show forbearance at such an ungodly hour for a Sunday, and kindly explain instead posthaste what current crisis has led to you skipping meals in the Great Hall."

"Theo is there. Severus, do you know anything about Dantanian Noir? Or about the Deathly Hallows?"

"Ah, yes, your new pet obsession," Severus said contemptuously. "I *have* heard talk of that. Do not labor under the illusion that I am not kept appraised of your activities, Draco, even if you do not personally inform me. Well, I do not believe the Deathly Hallows to just be a legend, as most in the wizarding world believe. It is illogical to think that Grindelwald could have been that foolish. But I have no other knowledge or *interest* in the topic. Tell me instead why it is you are unable to stomach Theo's presence now, when you have been his father's murderer for months."

Draco stared at his hands. "I talked to Theo yesterday. He heard me talking to the Ravenclaws, about the attack on Citadelle Xaphan. It- um, upset him, to hear that the protective pendant he gave me was what saved me from the falling stone. He said- he said he hadn't been able to sleep, wondering if that was why I had been able to-"

Severus's lip twisted. He put down his tea, looking genuinely concerned, perhaps for Theo more than Draco. "You should stay away from each other. Nothing good will come of further association, however *you* might wish to assuage your own guilt. Have you made your apologies and explanations? Has he asked the questions he needs answered?" Draco nodded twice, and Severus sighed heavily. "Then keep your distance. Difficult, given the number of classes you share, but as long as he seems willing to cooperate with that policy-"

"A Slytherin came to me and said Theo wants to kill me, and all the Slytherins hate me and want to help him," Draco admitted in a rush. *Of course they do- if Theo told them he thinks I lied about what his father was doing when I killed him...* He couldn't admit about the black dagger, but he could go this far. And it did make Severus look more troubled. "I'll try to stay on my guard, but I don't know what Theo-"

"Who told you this?" Severus asked, and Draco stayed tight-lipped. "One must admire your Hufflepuff-esque loyalty, Draco, but if you distrust me enough that you fear I will repeat the name, or cause trouble for the one who told you, then it seems useless for you to confide in me at all-"

"You can't tell, you can't, please, but- Millie. Millicent Bulstrode, on the train, when the others went to the Slug Club."

That did seem to put more fear into Severus's eyes, to hear it was someone sensible and competent. Vince or Greg might have rated less of a reaction.

"Alert your little friends," Severus advised, "And your Ravenclaw dormmates that there may be reprisal against you, but do not name names. Mr. Nott will not question that precaution after yet another confrontation. Unless Miss Bulstrode is willing to come forward to me officially, or there is anything else more concrete, I can do no more. Draco, just- at the risk of sounding like Moody- *be vigilant*. I will watch all I can from the dungeons, but you must sleep with one eye open. The knowledge that you killed his father to save *Sirius Black* from death will hardly have made it any better for Theo-"

"I'm not sure anymore, though," Draco blurted, and felt tears threaten at the mere idea, the impotent frustration of *not knowing*. "If it was- if I did save Sirius, if Nott really would have been about to kill him if I hadn't intervened- if I even *had* to do it... Theo said something. He didn't believe me, when I said I heard his father starting to say Avada Kedavra-"

"*You* know what you heard. Don't you?" When Draco shook his head, Severus looked disturbed. "You seemed certain of it in the aftermath, when memory is most distinct. Do not let your guilt make you question yourself unnecessarily-"

"But sometimes I do hear things that aren't there," Draco blurted. "Or... see things."

Severus leaned back in his chair, hands folding in front of himself, a resolute figure of strength in the face of Draco crumbling.

"You know my mind has *never* been right," Draco admitted, "With these panic attacks, and I've seen- I've seen my wand turn into Dumbledore's, felt the shape of it instead of the bent one- I've seen Fiendfyre coming after me when it wasn't there- I hear Aunt Bella's Boggart speaking to me, even though no one else does, though I thought that might be Occlumency- sometimes when I look at Luna, for a second I think it's Mother instead- and when I was tracking someone, I kept hearing the wrong place once- I don't know, there's so much- I don't know if it's the panic attacks, or the talon wand, or..." His tongue locked before he could say the end.

"Draco," Severus said in alarm, and went over to clasp his shoulder. "There is an easy way to solve this. Get up. You will look at the memory in my Pensieve."

"But what if I don't remember it right?" Draco asked, with his first thought, *I don't want to see it again, don't make me...*

"A Pensieve does not function in that manner," Severus explained. "It will show you things you did not notice in your own memory. Now come. I will instruct you how to extract a memory."

With Severus's guidance, Draco remembered the night of the 21st, from the beginning of his duel with Bellatrix, and pulled a silvery thread from his head. He had misgivings whether this would work, given how airtight his Occlumency had become in that mental Langlock. He placed in the water anyway, and then submerged his face there. It worked just the way a Pensieve was supposed to. Maybe it would only malfunction when it came to the blue loop.

He could feel anxiety and terror seize him again, the moment he was back at the Ministry, watching his friends run. "If they catch us, we die!" he watched himself yell. "They're not letting us live, not after what we did to him-" He saw the elation on his own face as they saw Remus, Sirius, and the Longbottoms arrive from the other direction, the now-comical relief with which both groups greeted their reunion, only for Aunt Bella to show up casting Confringo and blasting them all apart.

Merlin, he could barely even handle the sight of Bellatrix in a *Pensieve.* He didn't know how he'd managed to face her in an actual duel. How was he ever going to kill *that*?

He followed his old self, watching him run with the others behind the fountain, and Harry direct them to go around and surprise the Death Eaters with stunners. Harry was magnificent as ever in the face of danger. But Bellatrix's voice made it impossible to enjoy anything about the nightmare that Draco had been foolish enough to plunge himself back into.

Somehow his Pensieve self had the courage to actually challenge her. "Where's your *lord*? Snake-faced bitch sitting this one out? Did Tom Riddle flee? Like a *fucking coward*?"

Bellatrix reacted by flinging him high in the air, into the fountain, where they became purposefully isolated, a frantic duel immediately following.

It was hard to watch. He had remembered it as far closer than it was. He had thought it had practically been the flip of a coin that he hadn't won. But from the outside, it looked as if she was toying with him, especially after she made him Langlock himself. Objectively, it was good to inspect his dueling flaws. He already had put improving dueling on his list for the year. But seeing just how bad he was made him doubt his own presumption, to cast himself as a mentor for Hermione this summer, and back in fourth year for Harry. Bellatrix's sadism, playing with her prey before she devoured it, was the only reason that Draco had lived long enough for this to be seen in a Pensieve.

Once he won by default, watching her get taken down by her own Cruciatus, he had the displeasure of hearing himself interrogate her, threatening with a pathetic, broken voice. When she cackled to kill her, she looked more terrifying than ever, more in control. It was hard to believe Sectumsempra would have worked on her, even if he hadn't been distracted by Remus's scream.

Draco ran to follow himself, as he left Bellatrix behind. It was as he remembered, unconscious Death Eaters, Remus and Sirius disarmed, himself picking up their wands, Remus trying to crawl to Sirius and falling over Dolohov. Nott was standing over an unconscious Sirius raising his wand, his stooped back taut with tension as that deep, gravelly voice spoke the fatal words-

"Incarcer-" began Nott.

With a vicious, unrecognizable look on his own face, Draco's old self yelled out, "Sectumsempra!"

Slashes formed over Nott's body as he fell to the ground, tears in his skin appearing everywhere, diagonal across his throat and chest. His body shook with hemorrhaging, but Draco's old self just occupied himself getting Remus and Sirius to safety. He didn't look back once.

He didn't remember if he'd recognized Nott as Theo's father at the time, but he should have. They'd spoken last year at the Ministry, and right before, in that brief time Draco had spent pretending to be back on his father's side. Yet his old self didn't seem to care.

The memory ended and Draco pulled himself out of the Pensieve. Severus pushed him out of the way impatiently, submerging his own face.

Draco staggered back and sank down in one of Severus's familiar, comfortable armchairs. *Incarcerous*. Nott had been trying to *tie up* his already stunned enemy, a step to ensure he would be kept him out of the action. No more than Draco had done with his own mother that night, except Nott was minus the torture. Likely, Nott would have done no worse than Stupefy and Incarcerous to Remus as well.

Draco expected to cry, to have a respiratory fit, but nothing came, only numbness. He took the talon wand out of his pocket and laid it over his knees. He didn't bother not speaking to it aloud with Severus watching the Pensieve. "Did you do that? Was it you?" He supposed he understood how *Incarcer* could be misheard as *Avada*. But it had seemed so clearly *Avada* at the time, it was hard to think he hadn't actively hallucinated. He remembered the talon wand's failure at the tracking charm on Hermione while she was petrified in second year, telling him over and over, *Gryffindor stands*...

"Or is it just that there's something wrong with *me*?"

He didn't know if those were questions that could be asked separately anymore. The wand didn't answer, but when he stroked his fingers over, tracing the bend in the wood, there was an unmistakable comfort in it.

He was selfishly glad he had not seen this memory before speaking to Theo. What could he have said then? *Sorry, I was mistaken. I killed your father and told the world he was a cold-blooded murderer, when all along, really, that was me?*

Here was a riddle for the eagle knocker. What could be cold-blooded and still burn? *A dragon*.

"Draco," Severus said, emerging from the Pensieve with a colder face than he had entered it. "Did you hear?"

"'Incarcer'. Incarcerous," Draco said dully. "No missing it, was there?"

"I will destroy this memory," Severus said immediately. "We will speak to no one of this."

"Theo deserves to know the truth about his father-"

"Are you *trying* to die?" Severus's voice was firm as stone. "This changes nothing. You convinced the world and they believed it. Do not waste that. Anyone could have misheard. You are not at fault. Nott was fighting for the Dark Lord. He knew the risks. Have no pity for him or his son."

Amaranthium

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco left Severus's chambers convinced not to speak of anyone of the truth. Which meant that when Harry saw him in the library that afternoon, he had no good explanation for how distracted he was. Eventually, Harry pulled him into the stacks. "Are you tired? What, from Goldstein?"

"What?" Draco snapped to reality at the intensity in those green eyes. He couldn't help but wonder what Harry would think of him, if he knew the truth about Nott. He'd been projecting that scenario onto everyone he saw since he heard the truth. "What's wrong?"

"You weren't at breakfast. Or dinner last night. I didn't see you all yesterday." Harry said that sadly, as if it was some great curse inflicted on him.

"Dobby brought me food," Draco said, leaning back against the Transfiguration stacks. He hoped Harry didn't know that Draco sometimes saw or heard things that weren't there...

"Oh, did he bring you and Anthony Goldstein food too? In the Room of Requirement?" Harry delivered this fact like he had uncovered some great secret. When Draco just blinked, he grimaced. "Don't lie to me. I saw the two of you on the map, going to the seventh floor and disappearing."

Sounded like Draco had been overly optimistic to think Harry wouldn't watch him on the Marauder's Map.

Oh, so that's what this is. Harry's clumsy jealousy. I know that like the back of my hand. I can handle that. It was adorable and familiar and so far away from a world where Draco was a cold-blooded murderer, this one where Harry Potter would be so keen for fight for *him*.

"So this is one of your jealous fits?" Draco asked, trying not to laugh. He had bigger things to worry about than romance. But pretending to worry about it would suit him nicely, to quiet things he didn't want to think. "Over *Tony*? You really are reaching for excuses to work yourself up-"

"It's not *reaching*," Harry began. Draco looked around, considering a kiss. *Too crowded.*

"Okay, we shouldn't talk about this here." He took Harry by the hand.

"Why don't you want to talk about-"

Draco gave a long Severus-style eye-roll. "I mean you're probably gonna wanna get loud, and this is the library. We can go literally anywhere else you want." He waved goodbye to their friends as he passed. He got smiles, and a little thumbs-up from Ron, clearly grasping the situation better than Harry did. *See, Ron likes me, good honest blunt sweet Ron, he wouldn't give a* thumbs-up *to entrusting his vulnerable best friend to a forest fire.*

Draco led Harry out of the library hand-in-hand and up the closest flight of stairs, ready to be told off once they reached their destination. "Where are we going?" Harry asked, though he didn't seem to want to stop holding hands.

"The Room of Requirement," Draco said, "You can scream as loud as you like in there."

"What, did *Goldstein* make you scream?" Harry demanded.

"We *did* conduct some rather loud DA meetings in here, if you do recall." *I need the Occlumency room back.* When the door opened, there was the same set-up of the small, intimate room with a lit fireplace, except the green chair and fire were both blue.

He cracked up at the sight, which Harry did not seem to appreciate. He sat in the blue armchair, but Harry remained standing. "Why are you laughing?"

"Harry James Potter," Draco said with a contemptuous snort, "I am not cheating on you with *Anthony Goldstein*." He could have taken Harry to task for having so little trust in him. But given how it had been mere months since Harry found out about the Naufragiam, Draco couldn't exactly demand perfect untainted faith.

He didn't need that. What he needed was attention, to substitute his thoughts with someone else's- to stop playing *Incarcer* and *Avada* over and over in his head, to see how they might sound the same...

"You're sex-obsessed, if you think messing around is the only thing people do in pairs in here. I'm trying to get in good with my new dormmates, so when Tony wanted me to show him the Ninguifors spell, I brought him here. He *was* in DA with us, remember? It was just like a DA meeting."

Draco felt a not unpleasant shiver down his spine when Harry took his chin, tilting it up to look Draco directly in the eye. "You aren't attracted to Goldstein? Or any of the other Ravenclaws?"

Draco stared admiringly. "You think any of them do a thing for me when I'm dating *you*?"

"Don't flatter me," Harry said softly, and Draco tried to pull him down into a kiss.

Harry kept him at arm's length, and Draco pouted. *Enough foreplay already*. "What, we're finally alone and you don't even want to kiss me? Maybe *you're* the one who doesn't like *me...*"

"You can't just solve all of our problems with that-"

"I can't skip two meals without you being convinced I'm fucking *Anthony Goldstein*? I missed dinner last night because I was tired after playing football and took a nap. I had breakfast this morning with my godfather, ask Dobby, he catered. I'm forcing Severus to have a weekly check-in with me. And I *will* go to the Room of Requirement to show spells to anyone I like. *Just* spells." He looked up at Harry through his eyelashes. "Is that acceptable, my lord?"

"Shut up," Harry muttered, looking sheepish. "I just miss when we lived just next door. I get worried when you disappear and I don't know why..."

"No, I'm serious, dragonslayer," Draco purred. "Because if I've misbehaved too grievously, I'm sure you'll feel compelled to *discipline* me-"

"Shut *up*-"

"It would be annoying how possessive you are, if it weren't also rather... interesting." Draco pushed Harry back onto the red chair, remaining standing. "Do you want to see what I'm thinking of when I'm not with you? What I *want* from you?" Harry nodded raptly, leaning forward in his chair. Draco undid his Ravenclaw tie, tossing it away. Harry licked his lips, and Draco tossed his robes away too. *The way Harry's looking at you right now, Frankenstein, see that? See? Harry Potter wouldn't look that way at a monster.*

"Are you... are you gonna take off your clothes?" Harry asked hoarsely.

Draco tossed his hair back disdainfully. "Is that a complaint I hear? Perhaps I should not, then, at finding the other party so ungrateful..."

When he pulled off his sweater vest, Harry's pupils dilated. "Why are you," Harry began, only to break off and just rake a hand back through his hair, once Draco unbuttoned the top of his crisp white shirt.

"I want to show you," Draco said, a rush of power going through him, "Exactly who I belong to." The awareness of Harry's desire was an intoxicant he needed more of, to keep the truth about himself receding. He pressed a quick kiss to Harry's mouth before resuming work on his own shirt.

"Okay," Harry said, swallowing hard. Then there was some magnetism coming off him, leaning forward on that velvet Gryffindor red, that made Draco want to obey any command Harry gave. He didn't have to even try not to think of a world beyond Harry anymore. "If you want to, dragon. Take off your clothes for me."

Heat stabbed through Draco, hot as blue fire, an involuntary spike that made him pull so hard at the fourth button he nearly tore it. It was almost too much, watching Harry understand the situation and sit back, not trying to hide the physical effect on him.

"You look so good," Harry breathed, "Your skin with the blue fire, you're like an angel."

Draco tried not to react to the praise. He ran his fingers through his own hair teasingly instead, watching Harry watch him. When he bared his torso to the firelight, Harry looked

ready to leap on him.

When Harry tried to get up, Draco pushed his chest down. "Didn't you listen?" he laughed condescendingly. "I told you to *watch*. You haven't learned yet, jealous boy, so you need to be *shown* what belongs to you."

Draco made short work of his shoes and socks, and then straightened with a grin. He couldn't keep the adoration out of it. "Did you miss this?" he said, running a hand up his chest slowly, enjoying the feeling of his nipples hardening under his own touch. He took the HJP chain and pulled the initials forward. "It's like a collar, really. Marking who to return me to if I get lost..."

Harry looked serious instead of laughing. "God, Draco, I love seeing that on you."

Draco undid the fly of his trousers. "It's not enough for you, though, is it? I bet you wish you could have your initials on my skin. Your whole name."

"*Yes*," Harry gasped, gripping onto the arms of the chair hard enough that his knuckles were white. He looked rock hard now, as was Draco. Harry made a sound like he was being strangled once Draco was naked before him. One of his stiff hands shot out to loosen his tie, like he could hardly breathe at the sight. Draco pulled it off for him, tossing it away before reaching for Harry's glasses.

"No- not yet, I want to look at you properly."

Draco rolled his eyes but let Harry keep them on. "You like the necklace, huh?" Draco teased. "You like it when that's all I have on me?" Harry nodded raptly. Draco looked down at his own body, unabashed, and had hardly ever felt more graceful, like he had turned into a dragon more than a year early. Harry's fingers reached out and traced the dragon birthmark. Draco obligingly tilted his head, baring his whole neck and shoulder.

He expected Harry to start kissing there, but Harry surprised him by getting up and kissing him on the mouth. "Mmm, I thought... mmm... you wanted to- look at me," Draco gasped against those persistent lips, and Harry tackled him to the rug in front of the fire. Draco found himself on his back, half-winded with Harry on top of him, insistent and hungry.

"I've looked," Harry said inanely, and kissed Draco's neck finally, teeth dragging there in a way that made Draco's toes curl against Harry's ankle. "I don't know- tell me what you want-" His lips kissed at the skin over his own initials, and moved them out of the way, so as not to miss an inch of skin without taking it off. He nuzzled at Draco's shoulder finally, senseless with affection, even as his weight on top of Draco was irresistible, the stabbing shape of his arousal the most of all.

"*Off*," Draco demanded, and pulled at Harry's robes. Harry moved to help, and in the motion, their hips rubbed together. Maybe this didn't count as going slow, but it was slower than Draco *wanted*, and he *needed* Harry on top of him somehow, moving, pushing down...

He struggled to get Harry's sweater and shirt off over his head. "That's it, *move*, don't *stop*..."

Harry laughed when Draco's sweaty fingers were inept for once, and ripped off Harry's buttons instead of undoing them. "Who's the brute now? What... God, what is *that*..."

"Frotting," Draco informed him impatiently, rubbing up against Harry, and was rewarded by a rush of trailing spark-heat through every nerve below his abdomen, legs heavier with it. "Are you complaining? You put yours on mine, if you'll just let me get it *out*, before you're done too soon-"

"I won't be," Harry protested. Draco drank in that dizzying expanse of gorgeous tan skin, and felt like Sisyphus again, but if the man's boulder had climbed off his shoulders to kiss them instead...

"You're close," Draco murmured, and let his hands off Harry so they could press together.

Finally, Harry let Draco take off his glasses. Then they kissed with true abandon, green eyes turning to hazy pools before they were too close even for that, eyes shutting. Draco wrapped his arms around Harry, kissing him with everything in him, and felt Harry's hips try out a rhythm down on his, the same frenetic pace as he was kissing Draco back. "Don't come yet, Harry, don't..."

"You feel so good, though, dragon..." Harry stopped moving for a moment, head dropping to pant against Draco's shoulder. "You feel so good... God, Draco, I love you..."

"I love you too," Draco said, turning his head to nose Harry's face to his. He felt lightheaded from all this skin pressed together. "I love you so much," he heard himself admit, despite his best efforts to hold it back. He traced through Harry's hair more gently, admiring that face in the Patronus-blue glow from the fireplace. *Harry* was the angel, this young wild creature that seemed to radiate light himself rather than merely be touched by it. The familiar feel and Amortentia scent of Harry had driven every thought from Draco's head other than that angel, save that he had been upset about something, but it didn't matter anymore. "*Love* you, you stupid Gryffindor..."

Draco began to roll his hips up in liquid waves, muscles in his lower body tensing in anticipation of his own peak. His whole body felt good from it already, like being touched by Harry made him something worthwhile, his skin no longer a tainted and vicious and awful thing. Like maybe he could even absorb some of that light.

Harry rolled his hips down against Draco's more slowly, and then quickly again once he got another taste, bucking down in one unending wave of athletic thrusts, rhythm speeding with their breath. Before Draco knew it, he was the one gasping out the other's name and falling apart.

He felt the climax in his feet first, legs lifted jerking where they had coiled around Harry's waist. Harry kept rubbing down and then they were coming together, spurting wet against each other's skin where sweat already linked their bodies together, whole consciousness feeling expelled with every burst of seed leaking out of him and mixing with Harry's until they were the same, even stickier together. It felt as sweet and clinging as melted hard candy, trembling together kissing as they came until finally they had both gone limp in the blue firelight. Draco had come so hard, it left an ache in his thighs.

It felt like he had been exorcised. Like the nightmare he had seen in the dungeons was gone, and now he could go back to the reality he wanted. Like he had gone through a shattered mirror.

When Harry's hands ran down over Draco's hips, they felt hyper-responsive, sensual, the aftermath of coming leaving Draco's whole body deliciously sensitive to the touch. "Mmm, touch me," Draco breathed drowsily. He accepted Harry's kiss as he pulled them onto their sides and hugged Draco close with a drowsy smile. "Keep touching me."

Harry's green eyes sparked at the edge of Draco's vision, melted in the glow of ice-blue. When he obligingly tightened his grip, Draco's nails dug into his back. "You're gonna scratch me more?"

"I scratched you before?" Draco hadn't even realized. Doing this with the Chosen One for the first time had been rather too overwhelming to keep track of what he was doing with his *fingernails.*

"You are going to heal it, right? I'll have Quidditch practice soon."

Draco lost the ability to answer the question once one of Harry's hands strayed lower.

"I guess you'd like that, right?" Harry teased weakly, voice still somehow coming out a bit shy. "People seeing your nail marks on me?"

"Yeah," Draco said dumbly, entwining his thighs with Harry's. He registered what Harry was saying a moment later and laughed. He deliberately scraped at Harry's back.

"Ow! Draco, it's different if you just do it on *purpose* like that-"

Harry's other hand slid onto Draco's arse, and Draco purred helplessly, squirming into his arms all the closer. "You love it," Draco laughed. "Because it's my sign that you belong to me too."

"Yeah?" Harry said, and stroked softly, kneading. "Is... Draco, is this okay? Can I touch you here?"

"Touch me *anywhere*," Draco said breathlessly, and dragged his heel over Harry's calf as he kissed him between the words. "It feels so good it makes my brain shut off."

"Can we come back here?" Harry asked, kissing Draco's forehead and resting his lips there. "To the Room of Requirement? Just us? I want you alone as much as I can get..."

"Why is that even a question? I'll ask for a bed next time."

"Yes. Except keep the fire. You look *so* good in blue."

Draco rewarded Harry with another soft scratch, and Harry laughed. "You're vicious."

Draco smiled. "You have no idea."

In the blue loop, Draco had assumed it was nepotism, pure and simple, that kept Harry sticking to Ron as the Keeper, despite his ineptitude the past year. He hadn't reckoned on an unexpectedly Slytherin streak in Hermione Granger.

"Oh, yes, Hermione," Luna said happily, bringing a resistant-looking Neville around by her example. "That's a wonderful idea. You should *absolutely* cast a Confundus charm on McLaggen. Just make sure no one sees. Draco, let's stand in front of her so no one sees her!"

Draco was happy to oblige. They all took part from the stands in Hermione's sabotage. Hermione caught McLaggen well enough to keep him from saving almost a single shot after that.

Ron kept his position as Keeper, which at least marked one way Draco had failed to worsen the lives of his friends this year. It was already bad enough he seemed to have somehow made Harry worse at Potions. You would think increased proximity to Draco would *improve* him, but he was as mediocre at Potions as he was generally at classes- except for Defense, much to Severus's disgust. It was harder to pick on Harry for incompetence when Harry was the best in the class. Not that Severus didn't make an admirable effort. Who could have Severus beat for persistence?

Perhaps Remus, forced to deal with both husband Sirius and adopted Harry and Draco, with the expectation of somehow transforming them all into functioning human beings. He'd written that he wasn't disappointed that Draco wasn't a Gryffindor, and claimed Sirius wasn't disappointed either- a far less plausible prospect. He pronounced himself sad to hear that Draco did not intend to play Quidditch for Ravenclaw, but professed that whatever Draco chose, he and Sirius would remain very proud of him. It was a good memory to hold to himself, those words, when he watched Quidditch teams forming without him.

Gryffindor tryouts had been an annoying experience- well, other than watching McLaggen suffer, always a quality pastime. There were so many Potter fans, including more than a few younger Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, who showed up to 'try out', when in fact all they wished to do was to stare moonily and giggle about the Chosen One.

Was it not common knowledge around the school that Draco and Harry were an item? Was it just some of the DA members or sixth-years who knew? Because this level of ogling at Draco's boyfriend would have been unacceptable from even Myrtle, let alone underclassmen who Draco would have been happy to curse off their brooms to improve Hogwarts' future OWL averages. And it made his skin crawl every time he saw Harry and Ginny so much as speak to each other down there in their fetching, crisp Quidditch uniforms, knowing this the year the two became involved in the blue loop. Draco was ridiculous, he knew, mocking Harry's jealousy, when the mere sight of Ginny filled him with unspeakable impotent rage. But it remained that the more important Harry became to his continued sanity, the more intolerable he found the presence of what he still had to consider his one most significant rival.

The rest of that Saturday was no less of a test of Draco's patience. Hagrid was beside himself when they visited him after tryouts, only for them to find out it was over Aragog dying. They

had to feign concern and sympathy, though Draco felt more like throwing a private festivity at the news.

Luna and Neville didn't know a thing about Aragog, and Hermione and Hagrid hadn't heard the whole story of the encounter in the Forbidden Forest. They were forced to tell the story once a curious Luna harangued them enough. With his knack for lying, Draco was the one to take over and concoct a story that involved no Unforgivable curses whatsoever. He managed to convince them he'd gotten Aragog to back off by menacing him with stories of his father.

He found himself ready to start casting Lacarnum inflamari at random passerby by the time they reached supper. That *would* be one way to work out his tension. Instead, he contemplated giving Harry a word about meeting in the Room of Requirement after supper.

But Slughorn had to come sidling up in the Great Hall, inviting them to some ghastly Slug Club dinner instead. Draco had wanted so badly to get into that deranged little personal cult in the blue loop, and now he wanted little more than to get out of it. But he'd committed to this ruddy dinner. He hadn't had a choice but to humor Slughorn to get what he needed: a note for the Restricted Section, which, he knew from Severus, the other teachers at Hogwarts had long since been advised not to give Draco. After that implicit deal earlier in the week, Draco already had ten, count them, ten books on Grindelwald and related topics back in his trunk in Ravenclaw. The trade had been sleazily transparent when he spoke to Slughorn for permission. If he ever wanted the same privilege from Slughorn again, he had to play ball with the Slug Club.

Could the Death Eaters be considered the Dark Lord's personal Slug Club? Draco wondered if he should ever start up a club named after himself. The Frankenstein Club?

"I thought you weren't interested in this, Frankenstein," Hermione said, as they parted in the Great Hall from a sullen-looking Ron. Luna was doing a better job putting on a good face. But she was still pouty, not happy to watch her friends, cousin, and boyfriend go off to a fancy party without her.

Draco would have told Hermione about the Grindelwald books if Harry and Neville hadn't been listening. "That was before I heard my best friend, my boyfriend, and my *favorite Gryffindor* were all attending," he said, and gave Neville an appreciative look. Ginny snorted, and her amusement suddenly made the joke seem less funny to Draco.

Neville edged away from Harry. "Stop calling me that! Are you *trying* to get me killed?"

Draco shrugged. "Sorry, Neville. It's not *my* fault you're the best and brightest of Gryffindor-hey! Mmm. *Mmm*."

"Harry, if you want to kiss Draco, by all means, go ahead, but can you do it somewhere that isn't a safety hazard?" Hermione said crossly.

Harry pulled back from his vindictive little kiss looking sheepish. "Sorry," he said. "Sometimes the urge just kind of hits me, you know?" *See that, Girl Weasley?* Draco mentally crowed at Ginny. *See that? See how much he wants me?*

Harry looked to Neville for support, but it seemed Neville either did not experience such uncontrollable surges of affection when it came to Luna, or else was far better at suppressing them. And then Draco had to do the unthinkable, and go off willingly to eat a meal not just with Horace Slughorn, not just with Ginny Weasley, but with *Cormac McLaggen.*

Said dinner was just as boring as Draco had expected, the exact sort of snobbery he thought he had gotten away from when he left his old house. He spent most of his time staring into the distance, or more accurately, staring at Harry, as his boyfriend did his level best to chum up with Slughorn per Dumbledore's orders. And Harry was charming, though that assessment wasn't really gleaned from listening to him *talk.* It wasn't the worst thing, getting to look at Harry for this long a period, without fearing missing something important in a class. But when he'd had the prospect of going to the Room of Requirement together instead, it had his libido rather tormented.

They got out of Slughorn's useless rigmarole too late to go. Draco was left frustrated as ever, though Harry extracted a promise to meet up Sunday afternoon in the Room, with the look in his eyes leaving no mistake what he was planning once they were alone. Ginny looked merely amused again, while Neville let out a squeak, looking down with his round face beet red, and Hermione patted him on the shoulder with a fond look.

"Get used to it, Neville," Hermione said calmly. "If I'd kept on getting flustered every time Draco said something sexual, I'd have had a heart attack by now."

"You make me sound like some kind of pervert," Draco complained, as they reached the point where they had to go separate ways towards their towers.

"Oh, *you're* not the pervert, Frankenstein," Hermione said, giving Harry a telling look.

"Pervert is a harsh word for him," Draco said cheerfully. "'Senselessly besotted', maybe."

"I am not *senselessly besotted*!"

"Oh, so you don't want a kiss goodbye?" Draco teased. Harry conceded the point by default, by leaning in to steal a furtive kiss, and then running after his fellow Gryffindors.

When Draco reached the eagle knocker, it had yet another riddle that felt pointed, although that could be Draco's paranoia talking. "Why is an evil man like a cloud?" it asked.

At least the riddle itself couldn't have been easier. "Because the world gets brighter when he leaves."

"Well-reasoned," the knocker said, and Ravenclaw Tower opened for him.

There were perks to living in Ravenclaw. One was the ability to re-enlarge his Grindelwald board, putting it up in his dorm hidden behind an enchanted curtain, with little fear his dormmates would try to spy on it. Another was staying up late talking with Luna. He could talk to her for hours without getting bored. Not only did they have a fair number of

outlandish experiences and interests in common, she invariably had some perspective on most things he hadn't thought of before.

Moreover, they had friends in common, which meant that they could throw themselves together into planning Hermione a seventeenth birthday party. Seventeen was an adult in wizarding terms, though Hermione said she would still be considered a minor by Muggles. But she *was* a witch, and it wasn't every day that the brightest witch *or* wizard of a generation came of age.

"You know, I didn't really like Hermione much at first," Luna told him placidly. They stared down at their birthday brainstorming, curled up in a midnight blue chair with Luna on the arm. "I always got the feeling she didn't like *me*, not at all. Like she thought I was a nuisance to have around. And she acted like the Quibbler was just nonsense, it was very rude. But she helped me have my first ever birthday party with friends, and that was wonderful, before she and I even *were* friends. I'd like to give her a birthday as magical as she helped give me!"

"You mean your thirteenth birthday?" Draco laughed. "That was just you, me, her, and Dobby down in a random hall in the dungeons."

"It was *magical*," Luna repeated, gaze wistful.

"I remember you and Hermione just didn't seem to talk much. But then I told you to keep her company when I went home for Easter, and she brought you in about Uncle Sirius, didn't she?"

"I think I proved myself to her," Luna said thoughtfully, "Helping with that. And now she's like a big sister to me." She pulled at her Nightmare on Elm Street hoodie, a gift from Hermione, beaming. "She's such a special person, Hermione. I think we really *might* see her become the Minister of Magic someday, you know?"

"We will," Draco agreed. *You will.* It was one of those rare pangs he had, coming face-to-face with his implicit unquestioned belief that he would not survive the war: the thought he would not live to see Hermione take some stuffy old man's job from him.

They ended up with a spectacular party planned, with Flitwick's help. Flitwick had noticed Draco being somewhat fidgety during Charms, and called him to his office after dinner on Tuesday. He assured Draco he was in no trouble once he arrived, and gestured for him to take a seat.

"I noticed," he began, "That you did not try out for our house's Quidditch team."

Great. Was Flitwick about to compromise his professorly dignity by begging for Draco to replace Chang? "Yeah, it's a little hard to get hyped up for this season when last season, I killed my Chaser's father."

Flitwick looked taken aback by the reference, probably the most blatant Draco had given in front of him. He showed surprising mettle brushing past it. "I understand Quidditch might be difficult. Especially with your current schedule, Mr. Black. But you might miss it, and the exercise you get with it. It's important to have an outlet for stress. So I've heard that your old

Head of House gave you permission to take night flights on the weekend. I can write you a note for the same, including for you and your friends to stay out on the pitch past curfew. As long as you use it responsibly."

Draco regretted his smart answer now. "I don't understand, sir," Draco said, embarrassed at the kindness. "You didn't have to do this. Why would you go out of your way for me like this?"

"It's no trouble," Flitwick said. As if it was that simple, to do a favor and not expect anything in return. "You're a Ravenclaw now, Mr. Black. It is no trouble at all."

Draco thanked him and went to head out. But he hesitated at the door. "Wait, sir- I don't want to impose more, but could I possibly have permission for Thursday night this week? Only this week. It's Hermione Granger's birthday, and we wanted to do something special, because she'll be seventeen- it's her coming of age..."

"Of course," Flitwick said, eyes lighting up at the chance to do something nice for Hermione, clearly one of his favorite students. He amended the slip to give permission as well for the night of Thursday, September 19th, to Draco Black and associates.

Ron was excited when Draco showed him the slip and invited him to be his flying partner on Friday nights again. "We're not Quidditch rivals anymore, after all," Draco said cheerfully, and refused to wilt under Harry's jealous stare. "What?"

"Ron could use the extra practice," Luna said with her usual bluntness, and smiled at Ron, patting his arm reassuringly when he began to sputter.

"*I'm* not your rival anymore," Harry said sullenly. "And I *miss* playing Quidditch with you."

Draco leaned in to whisper, in his ear, "But you and I already have something special to do when we spend time together. Unless you'd rather replace that with flying..."

"No, no, no, no," Harry said, raising his hands, and Draco grinned.

It was short notice to prepare a party outside, but at least the weather seemed to be planning to cooperate, with a crisp chill but no rain or heavy wind. Draco wrote to the twins that night, and they sent a massive package of fireworks to the Ravenclaw table on the morning of Hermione's birthday. Draco ignored the curious stares and waited to open it, just praying for none of its contents to go off and set off a chain reaction before he could unpack them.

The fireworks ensured it would be as spectacular as Hermione's birthday in previous years, also celebrated out on the pitch with fireworks. Draco expanded the guest list to include far more people than usual, with a number of DA members invited, especially Ravenclaw ones. And to make it truly special, Luna had come up the idea to turn the Quidditch pitch into more of a garden. With her prompting, Neville organized what was in truth a far more romantic spectacle than any he had mustered for his actual girlfriend. They covered the Quidditch

stands and towers along with arches along the pitch in flowering vines, laden with Hermione's very favorite flower: the Christmas rose, even though it was out of season for it.

Draco used a burst of his magical power to fuel its spread, as directed by Neville. Along with the small galaxy of little floating bluebell flames above them, some of which Luna charmed pink and white, the pink and white of the Christmas roses was dazzling.

They led Hermione out blindfolded, and when she saw her party for the first time, she nearly burst into tears. "How did you do this?" she kept asking, and Neville shyly kept in the background.

"You have to do something like this for Luna sometime, you know," Draco whispered in his ear, as Luna took Hermione off on a tour of all of her decorations. "Definitely on Valentine's Day. You're not exactly bringing the heartstopping romance, partner."

"Did Luna say something to you?" Neville gasped, hands flying to his mouth. He stared longingly after her. In the galaxy glow amongst the flowers, Luna's floaty, glitter-covered white tulle dress made her look like a fairy princess.

"No," Draco lied, "But she didn't have to. Not when there's Harry breaking his back to make sure he knows how much I adore him every day. It's not fair to compare, but it's human, you know?" He waved over at Harry, who was being assisted by DA members at setting up the fireworks. The two-handed wave of excitement Harry gave back told its own story. "My cousin is a special person, Neville. Really, really special. I don't know why you're not more demonstrative-"

"I never know how," Neville mumbled, looking down shamefacedly. "I'm still kind of... I don't know, terrified of her? And it's not like I have any idea how to be someone's boyfriend anyway. I could never act the way *Harry* does. It works for him... but *me*? I'm too scared she'd laugh in my face."

"Grow some balls, Longbottom," Draco ordered. "There's going to be music later. Muggle music and dancing. I suggest you ask her to dance then, or someone else will."

Dobby had outdone himself with the cake, a massive tower of red velvet and cheesecake buttercream that even two dozen attendees couldn't put much of a dent into. Dobby put a fair dent in himself, sitting with Luna and Draco and chattering happily, although the absence of Wooky and Nissy was noticeable to anyone in the know.

Dobby had woven Hermione a very credible jumper, in a dusky rose-pink that suited her very well. She immediately put it on, though it clashed with her yellow dress. It was probably the best gift she got that night, although Draco liked to think she would also enjoy his present.

It was a generously sized bottle of Amaranthium, a dark raspberry-carmine perfume, in its unadulterated traditional composition: amaranth petals, amaranth dew, holy water, concentrated clavohuasca, and Essence of Amortentia, which had none of the love potion elements, only the magically appealing smell of it. Draco had mixed the perfume himself.

"What *is* this, Draco?" she asked, scandalized, to great laughter and applause.

"It's pureblood tradition!" Draco protested. "In the oldest families. It's a coming of age present!" Hermione took it, red-faced, and unstoppered it, sniffing it tentatively. Even meters away, Draco could catch a whiff of that heavenly smell, not very different than the one already nearby: Harry, the Quidditch pitch, flowers. She got redder when she smelled it, though, as if not liking what Amortentia smelled like to her. She closed it and shoved it inside her bag. He could read on her face that she was embarrassed, but she would probably wear it at least once.

It was hilarious, really, to think of her tormented by Amortentia smelling like *Ron Weasley.* To judge by Ron's romantic history with Brown in the blue loop, if you wanted Ron, you could *have* him. All you needed was two X chromosomes and a pulse, and the pulse might be negotiable.

Hermione also seemed to like Luna's present, a volume of Greek Muggle mythology. She seemed tempted to dive into it rather than dance, but her partygoers dragged her to the dance floor. Except then a slow song was first. She and Ron jumped back from each other like they both had the plague, sidling back to their seats. "Come on, Cannon, go dance with the birthday girl, someone's got to," Draco hissed in his ear, and Ron shuddered.

"Why can't you do it?" Ron hissed.

"Do you *want* Hermione to get slugged in the face on her seventeenth birthday?" Ron laughed, but made no move towards Hermione. "You danced with her at the wedding," he prodded, and finally, reluctantly, Ron got up and asked the birthday girl to dance. There was no missing how pleased she looked, smiling to herself at her feet, as she joined him for a waltz.

In contrast, right when the music started up, Dobby beat Neville to the punch and asked Luna to dance. Draco was left standing at the side, trying not to cry from laughing, at the sight of a glum-faced Neville watching helplessly as he had his girl stolen by a house elf.

Dobby tended to be the world's biggest fan of Neville and Luna's romance, so Draco had the feeling Dobby wanted to give Neville a kick up the backside. That, and Dobby was a surprisingly good dancer himself.

Harry came straight over to Draco, as Draco had known he would. Or at least thought he would, if he knew what was good for him. *No dancing with Ginny for you this time.* Harry was dressed in the dress code of nice Muggle clothes that Draco had imposed. His burgundy button-down was unbuttoned at the collar, his black slacks close-fitting, hair in about as much of a semblance of order as possible, and he stood there surrounded by small glowing fires and flowers. He had scarcely ever looked more like something out of a fairytale, even with the bloodied sword of Gryffindor in his hand.

"Everyone will see," Draco breathed. "They'll talk..."

"Let them," Harry said without a second's hesitation, and it was impossible to say no to him then.

It sent a hush around the party when they got up to slow dance together. The silence was so profound that Draco had to recognize, maybe fewer DA members had known about them than Draco had given credit for. That didn't make Harry slow to pull Draco against him. Draco let him, resting his hands on Harry's firm chest, while Harry's went to his hips. Draco was the better dancer, but they were barely dancing, just stepping and swaying together, so it didn't hurt to let Harry lead. Or to let Harry nuzzle into his hair, lips hot against his ear. "Stop trying to turn me on," Draco whispered, and Harry laughed breathlessly, hands threatening to travel lower.

"I'm not *trying*," Harry whispered back. "I just like being close to you. You don't know how bad I wanted to dance with you at Sirius and Remus's wedding. It was torture, looking at the other couples and not getting to have this with you..."

"Okay, so then what are you going to complain about now, Chosen One?"

Harry seemed too captivated to dispute the taunt. He nuzzled from Draco's hair to his cheek, before pressing a soft kiss to his lips and resting their foreheads together. "I have," Harry breathed, "No complaints," and Draco's heartbeat sounded dangerously fast in his own ears. *You're dancing with a cold-blooded murderer,* he should have said to Harry. But it just didn't seem true, what he had done to Theo's father, when Harry was kissing him.

"You two are so cute," Hermione laughed as she and Ron passed, "Such a romantic pair," and oh, she was asking for it.

"So are you two *lovebirds*," Draco called, in the same simpering tone. Ron tripped over his own feet, and nearly knocked Tony into Padma Patil's cleavage. Which from the looks of it, a medium-level soused Tony wouldn't have overly minded.

This was one of those nights to store up for the war to come, where there was no immediate threat hanging over them, and everything on the surface seemed alright. Neville even managed to get Luna back from Dobby after a few dances, standing up bravely asking if he could cut in. And Draco gave in to Harry's whining and danced with him more, a couple of faster songs and another slow one. For that night, surrounded by fire and flowers, he could believe everything was going to be alright.

There was a price, almost immediately, to that unbroken illusion of happiness. He received a warning letter from Skeeter the night before, claiming she'd had no part in the story and tried to stop it- reading between the lines, it seemed to all add up to *Please don't hunt me down and curse me*. He understood when the Prophet arrived Monday with a picture of him and Harry dancing and kissing on the cover.

THE CHOSEN ONE AND THE DEATH EATER'S SON

The picture that broke a thousand hearts- perhaps more? The Boy Who Lived has been acclaimed once more as the hero of the wizarding world after his battle with dark forces at

the Ministry of Magic, and yet he has been harboring a dark secret, writes Malcolm Billock. Sixteen-year-old Harry Potter has recently been named the new Quidditch captain for Gryffindor, and yet it seems he may play for another team. The Boy Who Lived has bestowed his much-coveted affections on another boy, a boy whose father now resides in Azkaban, exposed to the world as a Death Eater in the Battle of the Ministry.

Lucius Malfoy's son Draco, sixteen, was adopted this summer alongside Mr. Potter, by the notorious ex-fugitive Sirius Black. Mr. Draco Lupin Black was disowned by the Malfoy family after his role in the Battle of the Ministry, in which he used an unknown cutting curse to end the life of Mr. Cantankerous Nott. A former Ministry employee, Mr. Nott was the seventy-two-year-old father of a classmate.

Mr. Black has long cut a controversial figure at Hogwarts, with rumors surrounding him of troll attacks, Basilisk worship, dark curses, and deadly blood magic. He is banned from a number of locations at Hogwarts and in the nearby town of Hogsmeade. Some darker rumors have even suspected him in the mysterious death of Peter Pettigrew, which re-opened the case of his cousin Sirius Black.

"Draco is unstable and violent," says his former housemate, Blaise Zabini, a well-spoken and distinguished young man of good family. "None of us ever felt safe living with him. We're glad he's gone. Now I just pity the Ravenclaws."

Mr. Black has been a hanger-on of Harry Potter's since their arrival at Hogwarts, says their yearmate Zacharias Smith, a top performer in athletics and academics. "I think they've been involved for a while," alleges Mr. Smith, "Because he's so protective of Harry. Draco will curse you just for looking at Harry Potter funny. He's a bit unhinged, I think. Because he really, really loves cursing people. He's famous for cursing their tongues."

The wizarding world will surely be troubled by the association of the famous Chosen One with an individual of such a dark reputation. Yet Mr. Potter and Mr. Black have reportedly flaunted their romance. "Harry Potter bought his boyfriend a necklace with his initials on it, HJP," says Alice Whittaker, an employee at the fine dress shop Madam Malkin's. "They kissed right in front of me afterwards. I thought they seemed very sweet and in love." Mr. Black is said to wear this necklace daily to his classes at Hogwarts. He has proved appreciative of expensive presents from Mr. Potter and his family since he was disowned from the Malfoy fortune.

Young men often experiment with unusual attachments, out of youth and inexperience. Whether this indiscretion is a mere act of childish rebellion, or something more serious for the Chosen One, only time will tell. "I don't think it will last," says Mr. Black's former housemate and Quidditch teammate Millicent Bulstrode, a sturdy girl. "Draco is not a loyal person. If Harry Potter doesn't get away from him soon, Draco will destroy him."

Harry Potter's well-wishers may only hope that Miss Bulstrode is proved wrong, and Mr. Potter will not have his heart broken by the notorious son of a notorious Death Eater.

Verniculpa

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Chin up, Draco," said Luna. "It could be worse."

"How? *How* could it be worse?"

Luna took the question literally. "For one," she said logically, "It could have said you *definitely* killed Peter Pettigrew."

"If it wasn't for libel law, they probably would have," Draco muttered. But he tried to put on his most unbothered expression, with more and more people reading their copies of the Prophet or being shown.

It was causing such an immediate furor that Draco and Harry must indeed *have* largely been a secret to the student body. Certainly to the faculty, to judge by the alarmed whispering up at the high table. Draco tried not to look for long, not wanting to see Severus. Draco wouldn't be able to keep on a good face on if he thought of Severus's reaction.

"Draco," Hermione said firmly, coming over and moving Tony unceremoniously aside to plop there. Her support was immediate and unequivocal. She flung an arm around him, Luna following suit from the other side, Rat Thieves assembled. "They couldn't have done worse at a smear job if they tried. All they've done is make you sound like some dangerous bad boy type." Surely she had to hear how she was stretching, but Luna nodded eagerly in agreement.

"The way they put it, you're like star-crossed lovers," Luna said dreamily. "That's what the headline sounds like. The Chosen One and the Death Eater's Son. Not a terrible title for a ballad."

"Like Romeo and Juliet," Hermione chimed in, and looked exasperated when Draco as well as Luna gave her a blank stare. "Oh, come on, how much time did I spend reviewing Muggle literature with you? And you still don't know Shakespeare?"

"I know Shakespeare great," Draco said defensively. "I wrote an essay on him. I got an O on my Muggle Studies exam, didn't I? I discussed Titus Andronicus, and King Lear, *and* Macbeth."

"Of course you only learned the plays with all the *mutilations,*" she sighed affectionately. "I *know* you know Macbeth, there's that spell we were working on..."

"Oh. Speaking of mutilations, what are we going to do about this?"

"Draco," Hermione said severely, "The first thought on your mind should be how this affects Harry, not on getting revenge-"

"I need to get revenge *for* Harry, so no one will run their mouth about him again-"

"There were so many people at that party, Draco," Luna fretted, "And anyone could have sneaked up and taken it who wasn't even invited, there's no telling who sent it in..."

"I just care about the three names interviewed in the article from Hogwarts. That shopgirl, she's fine, but Smith, Bulstrode, Zabini- everyone's going to expect me to-"

"Stop listening in," Ron snapped at the nearby Hufflepuffs, as they all huddled with their copies of the Prophet, an emergency conference between Rat Thieves and Blunderbusses. "Good to hear Draco's already plotting the removal of entrails."

"You mean Aruspices mitte? I can do that curse, yes, but you were right to mention the Macbeth curse, Striker, I've just been *waiting* for the chance to try it on someone but myself..."

"You *tried it on yourself*?"

"And it worked! Congratulate me!"

"We still don't know where the *blood* even comes from-"

"Draco," Harry said softly. He looked incredibly pale, but determined to be brave. "Draco, are you alright?"

Draco scrunched up his nose. "Are *you* alright? You're the one who just got outed. Everyone already knew *I* fancy blokes." There didn't seem to be an eye in the Great Hall not on their little group. "Come on, let's finish our breakfast in the kitchens. We're giving this lot a free show here. Next time, make them pay admission at least." Draco took Harry's hand softly. "Do you mind?"

"No," Harry said, and led Draco out of the Great Hall with his head held high.

Their friends went with them to meet Dobby in the kitchens, where he was happy to run them breakfast as well as completing his own duties. He looked sad, though, as clearly even the house elves had managed not to miss the newest big news at Hogwarts. It seemed to reassure him as he passed to see Draco, at least, in visibly good spirits.

There was an awful, awful part of Draco's mind that couldn't help but notice, *This traps him in. This keeps him publicly bound to me.* Unless the public scrutiny would make Harry lose his nerve and disavow him entirely. That didn't sound like the heroic Boy Who Lived- but just one more stressor added to an already contentious relationship could be the straw that broke the camel's back-

"Draco, what are you going to do to them? The people interviewed?" Neville asked.

"Ssh. We can't talk about this here. Wooky and Nissy are over there. And Zabini's still dating Parkinson. I think." He explained the connection, and reassured Harry he was fine, before he and Hermione had to rush off to Ancient Runes.

He dreaded Defense, remembering how Severus had once read aloud Harry's press clippings about the supposed romantic drama with Hermione, when he found him reading them during class in the blue loop. But Severus made no acknowledgment, and if he was a little harsher on Harry than usual, well, he was always harsh on Harry Potter.

Draco had no idea if the spell would work, let alone as intended, but if certain people hadn't wanted to sign up as guinea pigs, they should have learned what happened to those who spoke ill of Draco Malfoy- no, of Draco *Black*.

It was mystifying, staring at the three offenders in turn, what any of them had been thinking. Did they think just because he was no longer a Malfoy or a Slytherin, that he had undergone a personality transplant? That he would feel guilty enough about Theo's father to spare Theo's friends? Maybe they'd thought they were speaking off the record, or just hated Draco enough to be willing to suffer the consequences.

They should have. But Draco found himself in Potions listening to Slughorn with very little will to cast the curse on either Millie or Blaise, now that they were sitting there before him. And it wasn't because the Macbeth curse was relatively untested. It was that he didn't *want* to curse them, any more than he had Pansy by their side back in third year, after she'd blinded him in the Manor gardens at night. Whatever revenge his old friends had wreaked on him, he couldn't say he hadn't deserved it. Or he was just too fond of them to make them hate him even more.

Or the presence of Theo by their side.

He had none of those compunctions when it came to Smith. His fingers itched in his pocket poised over the talon wand, when he walked past Smith at dinner. He was running his mouth to Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, and a group of other female Hufflepuffs. Abbott and Bones had both had their mothers killed in the past months. You would think the universe would not also be so cruel as to inflict *Zacharias Smith* on these ladies.

"Everyone on the Hufflepuff team says I'm the fastest Chaser by far," Smith bragged, and Draco thought about how some people just *deserved* to have unstable blood magic tested on them.

But if he went after one, he'd have to go after all three.

When his friends asked him why the three slanderers were walking about unhurt, he claimed he was still perfecting the Macbeth curse. Even if his airy evasions of Hermione's offers to keep helping him with it put a suspicion on her face, which seemed to say she knew exactly where his hesitation was coming from. "Do you know, Frankenstein," she whispered as they parted, "Sometimes I wish you *were* as vile as everyone says you are?"

"I thought you wanted me to show mercy," Draco teased, and Hermione shrugged. It seemed any stretch of time in the presence of Zacharias Smith had turned her mind bloody as well. "So you'll miss the sight of those eminently curseable fools suffering from the fruits of our genius?"

"Langlock," Hermione said firmly. "If you change your mind, use *Langlock.*"

Draco used nothing, even with showers of hate mail raining down. It put his focus, as first advised, onto the effect on Harry. Sirius had written Draco a letter about how to handle all the press and attention from the Prophet article. His advice to Harry by the mirror had been to be as overt and proud as he liked, to show everyone he was unashamed, and they could think as they liked. To Draco, he advised that if anyone was too persistent in messing with him and Harry, a few well-chosen low-grade hexes couldn't go amiss. Draco didn't think Remus would approve- but then again, he *had* been forced to spend a year instructing Zacharias Smith how to deal with Boggarts and the like. One could hardly imagine a circumstance better calculated to incline a person towards condoning violence.

Millie and Blaise were both with Draco in Potions, but it remained an impasse between them. No one had dared to openly take up the topic of the article with Draco, let alone dare to mock or insult him, but he was getting stares worse than even the supposed Heir of Slytherin. He didn't know how badly Harry was getting it, the stares changing in quality rather than quantity for him, though Harry's own stares seemed reserved for the Slytherin section, particularly Theo. Draco knocked his foot gently against Harry's reassuringly, smiling at him. In a bit of irony, it made Harry accidentally drop a balled-up piece of paper he'd been readying to send as a note to Draco into his own Wit-Sharpening potion.

"You don't think there's any way the Dursleys could hear about this, do you?"

Draco looked up, alarmed, but Harry gently settled Draco's head back, so he could keep stroking his hair. Now that they were publicly outed, there really was no point not engaging in public shows of affection like this, even in the middle of the Transfiguration courtyard. If anyone had an issue with Draco lying out on the grass in Harry's lap, they were invited most earnestly to come to Draco and express it. See how that turned out for them.

"They don't exactly subscribe to the Prophet, do they?" Draco said with a contented sigh. "And here's where their abhorrence of magical folk comes in handy. Any normal family, your Aunt Petunia would have kept in contact with Remus and Sirius after the adoption. Remus misses your mother so much, he *would* have reached out to her sister. But the Dursleys, being what they are... they're out of your life for good."

"Sirius and Remus are gay too," Harry said quietly. "Even if Aunt Petunia loved magic, she wouldn't want anything to do with them. She'd probably think they were coming to corrupt her Dudders."

"I saw what they were like," Draco sighed, more ruefully. "You don't have to tell me, Harry, I saw it in your head when we were doing Occlumency."

"I keep expecting people to say something to me," Harry said anxiously. "I know I'm lucky, that I have Sirius and Remus waiting for me now, not the Dursleys, but- I don't know how you've done this since *first* year. I keep thinking people will come up and do something about it. They obviously want to, people stare more than ever, but they don't ever have the nerve... I can't believe I did this to you, accidentally outed you. Back in *first* year. And your father *did* find out, right away."

"I saw how that happened in your mind during Occlumency too," Draco said, and turned his face to press a kiss to Harry's rough palm before settling in and letting him resume his normally scheduled stroking. "I don't blame you, alright? I could tell you were... intrigued. Even back then."

"Shut up," Harry laughed, protesting but not very hard, and played with the feathery strands of hair over Draco's forehead. "Of course I was curious. You're so strange. In a good way. Everyone is boring compared to you." He laughed again as he sensed Draco's reaction. "And yeah, I know it's not always a good thing that you're so interesting-"

His voice trailed off so abruptly that Draco looked up as well. Harry was staring at the entrance to the courtyard, where Theo stood there alone, watching. Upon being noticed, he quickly crossed the courtyard along the edge, and went out of sight.

"He hasn't given you any trouble, has he?" Harry asked anxiously. "This is going to sound psychotic, but the reason I've been watching your name on the map a lot- it's not just cause I miss you, or that I get jealous. It's that oftentimes when I see your name, he's nearby- but not too close, just *around*, like he's following you..."

"No, you don't have to worry about Theo," Draco lied. "We're just staying away from each other. It's fine. Worry more about being outed."

"Honestly," Harry said softly, "I'm just more upset they said all those awful things about you," and played with Draco's necklace a bit before he tugged him up into a kiss. Draco forced himself not to kiss Harry back too long out in public, but it was difficult.

"Don't stop stroking my hair," Draco whined as his head dropped, enjoying what he knew would be some of the year's last rays of pure sunlight. "And hey, it's not like any of it wasn't true..."

"Of course it wasn't true!" Harry said hotly. "That last part? About how blokes have, like, youthful indiscretions, and this is probably just that, just an *experiment* on my part?" When Draco was conspicuously silent, Harry's voice went tighter. "Sirius said that was the biggest codswallop he'd ever read in his life. *You* know that's totally wrong, don't you?"

"Sure," Draco said, and that noncommittal a tone meant Draco's lulling idyll in Harry's lap came to a close.

"It's not true!" Harry protested, and Draco got up, frowning.

"We are *not* about to have a fight in public," Draco warned. "I'm not having it."

"I don't want to fight with you," Harry said, frustrated. "I just don't know what else I can do to prove to you that this is real. I mean, I thought you would be put in Gryffindor and we'd still see each other all the time, but-"

Draco sat up. He should have known that Harry wouldn't be over Draco not becoming a Gryffindor so quickly. Admittedly, it would have made it a lot easier, to look after each other in the aftermath of that vitriolic article. "You're never going to get over that, are you. That I got Sorted twice and still didn't end up with you." Draco smiled crookedly. "What, does it mean we're just not meant to be together?"

Harry crossed his arms. Draco unfolded them for him purposefully, extracting each hand so he could hold both in his. It made the tense look on Harry's face melt, once Draco swung them a bit between them, playfully. "You're so funny," Harry said helplessly, and kissed him.

"Do you want the truth?" Draco said, pulling back from the kiss with a sudden impulse. "I lied, alright? It wasn't between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. It was Ravenclaw or Slytherin. The house *wanted* to put me *back* in Slytherin. I asked for Gryffindor, over and over, and the hat wouldn't even consider it. Just said I could never be a Gryffindor."

Harry's eyes absorbed all this gently. None of the repugnance that Draco had expected was there. "Draco," Harry said softly, "You don't have to be a Gryffindor for me to love you."

"Fucking sap," Draco said, and Harry pressed their foreheads together.

"Yeah. I love you, dragon," he whispered, and Draco's heart exploded.

"Get out of my face, dragonslayer," he whispered back, and Harry smiled. Draco kissed that smile, until he had that hunted feeling he was being watched. He'd ignored it once before in this courtyard, and it had been Theo. So he sat up quickly, whirling to see if Theo had come back, and what he might want now. He heard Harry too breathe that uneasy question of *Nott?* before they both saw it was Millie this time. And she didn't run off at being seen.

Harry tensed, though Draco was proud he didn't do far worse. "What do *you* want?"

"Harry, let me handle this," Draco said, climbing quickly to his feet, but Harry caught his hand before he could fully straighten up. "What," Draco whispered teasingly at the worry in Harry's eyes. "Do you think I can't handle myself?" The wariness didn't waver. "She won't hurt me. I promise," he whispered, and Harry let him go.

Draco swept past Millie rather than speak to her outright. "Follow," he hissed, "Or would you rather stand there for the world to see like some enchanted dummy for curse target practice," and she trailed at his heels all the way to the first abandoned classroom nearby, looking around to make sure no one saw them together. They made it into a singularly dusty and dilapidated room, and Millie covered her mouth, coughing like Dolores Umbridge on a cloudy day. Draco would have taken a childish satisfaction at the sight, if it also hadn't immediately irritated his sinuses. He tried to keep his voice suave and confident despite it. "Have you changed your mind," he drawled ironically, "About becoming a spy for the side of light?"

Millie ignored his facetiousness. "Why," she hissed with deep indignation, "Have you not cursed me?"

Draco blinked several times. "You sound *resentful* of that, Miss Bulstrode. Are there certain elements to your sex life that-"

"I'm not in the mood to listen to your self-indulgent failures at being humorous, Grindelwald," Millie hissed still more venomously. "You're going to give away that I helped you if you keep up this *mercy* nonsense." She rolled her eyes at his face of incomprehension. "What, isn't that why you haven't cursed all three of us to kingdom come?" Well, that explanation was less embarrassing than the truth, even if it still made him look stupid. *Better foolish than weak with sentiment*.

"I only gave that bloody interview to try and look like I was totally against you. To keep up my cover after I *helped* you. And now you're ruining it! Of course you are! This is what I get for-" Draco opened his mouth, and she held up a hand warningly, not quite done venting her spleen at him. "And if you ever call me *Miss Bulstrode* again- when I'm done with you, they'll have to start calling *you* Miss Black!" The effect of the threat was somewhat diluted by the rash of coughing she broke into then.

Draco reflexively shifted his hips to the side, to place a bit more protective distance between Millie and his more sensitive parts. "So that's why you did it? To cover your tracks after you warned me?" Millie nodded tightly. "Well, I don't *wanna* curse you, Millie," Draco whined. "Okay, can I just curse Blaise and Smith-"

"You aren't listening at all! How would you explain it, just showing *me* mercy?"

"Easy," Draco said, crossing his arms. "I can say you apologized to me and that you actually seemed to mean it-"

"I am not *apologizing*!" Millie snapped, crossing her arms protectively over her large chest. "You think *that's* going to win me points with Slytherin? I wouldn't apologize even if I *had* just done it to be vicious, because it's the least you deserve-"

Draco considered. "You were the only one on the Kingsnakes. I can say you deserved more mercy because you were such a useful Keeper." He saw her gaze darken at that. "I'm sorry about *that*, Millie. You deserve to be on the Slytherin team. You really are the best Keeper I've ever seen at Hogwarts, you know that? The way you ran plays and directed them, not just the shot-stopping- you could go for professional, I'm serious-"

"Oh, thank you, that's very helpful-"

"Okay, how about I just say it's because you got insulted in the article too?" Millie frowned, confused, and Draco tried not to snicker. "Oh, come on, Mills. I've practically memorized that slander piece by now. Am I to believe *you* were happy, seeing Smith called a top performer, and Blaise well-spoken and of good family, and you were just *a sturdy girl*?"

Millie flushed, looking down. "The reporter was a real pillock. I pissed him off, I think. I don't think I gave him what he wanted. He kept trying to get me to- to talk shit about what it

was like playing for the Kingsnakes. About how you were a bad captain, and we hated each other, and it was all a farce. And I- maybe I should have gone along with whatever he wanted, to act like I really hate you- which I *do*," she added, too hurriedly for there not to be some gray there. "But I wasn't- I wasn't going to lie about *that*."

"It was," Draco began, and blamed the sudden hot itchiness in his eyes on that awful dust. "It was... something, wasn't it, the Kingsnakes? You were brilliant, I mean it- we *all* were. Whatever happened after, we- I'm proud of it, the team we were-"

"Then why did you have to just throw all that away?" Millie demanded, front of sardonic loathing failing her, as her voice broke with unwanted feeling. "I- Grindelwald, I was never so happy in my life, as when I was Keeper for the Kingsnakes."

Draco opened his mouth, to say that he'd had to kill Mr. Nott, to save Sirius. But with the regret on her face so matching his own, he felt unable to lie to her. They stared at each other for a long, hopeless moment, and Millie clearly tried to make her face harden. She somewhat succeeded. "You'd better have me good and cursed by tonight," she said menacingly, "Or I'll call up that reporter and tell him-" She seemed to fail at thinking of something sufficiently awful. "I'll tell him you're having an affair with Pansy or something!"

They had Potions so many days a week, another chance presented itself that very afternoon. They'd progressed to the actual brewing for Wit-Sharpening Potion, which had everyone wearing gloves for chopping the very strong ginger root that Slughorn had bragged of specially getting them. He couldn't have asked for a better way to cast the curse surreptitiously, as the effects would not be immediately obvious. And in actual brewing, the prospect of freak Potions accidents causing strange effects was just plausible enough to hide behind, even if it happened to be suspicious that that accident only affected people who'd spoken ill of Draco Black in the Daily Prophet.

It was not hard to be a sharpshooter. Draco went to gather a second share of ginger root, an unnecessary trip that had Hermione watching him like a hawk. She was the only one to notice, though, as he moved his arm in the distinctive swooping circle and then curve downwards that only she knew to recognize, the talon wand held right tight to his wrist and thrumming as he cast once, twice, thrice passing the Slytherins and then Hufflepuffs. Slughorn was busy sucking up to Harry, and everyone else was concentrating on their Potions. Draco made sure of it before he moved his wand and whispered each time. *Verniculpa, Verniculpa, Verniculpa.*

Once for the handsome, confident face of Blaise, as he and Pansy watched Millie to be sure of proper technique. One for the concentrated, sharp brown eyes of Millie as her knife struck down with perfect exactitude into the roots. And one, far more gladly given, for the smug blond head of Smith, as he somehow, improbably, once again bragged to the other poor Hufflepuffs about his Quidditch playing.

Draco was settled back at his cauldron before there was any visible effect. "What happened to Langlock?" Hermione whispered despairingly. "I miss Langlock."

"People are *used* to Langlock," Draco whispered back smugly. "I've been doing it since first-year. Severus has an *antidote* he can just hand out. It was time to upgrade, don't you-"

He was interrupted by an explosion. Smith's rather high-pitched shriek filled the air, then more shrieks erupted as Smith's cauldron overflowed and coated the floor of the classroom. Such eruptions were hardly normal in a sixth-year NEWT-level Potions class, and Slughorn rushed over with immediate dismay. Except the bubbling was hardly liable to cease anytime soon, with Smith's stunned hands frozen above the ruined cauldron.

"Draco Lupin Black," Hermione hissed, two of the only students still in their seats, "Is that iron from *blood* dripping onto the spleen? Because surely *Severus Snape's godson* wouldn't have forgotten the chemical reaction and cast-"

Draco considered, tilting his head fascinated by the sight of the dripping from Smith's palms, and the more unhindered flow from Blaise's two red-covered hands, with his gloves removed but the curse as of yet unnoticed. "I mean, it wouldn't have reacted with *ginger*-"

"Theo!" Millie cried, and Draco's heart went to his throat. Millie was the only other person still sitting, though Theo's sandy head whipped from Smith's cauldron back to her at her voice. Millie's gloves were off too, and the blood was pooling from her hands onto her table, coating her palms completely and puddling there between the stumps of well-chopped ginger root like some murdered creature in the forest. The pale brown of the root soon disappeared under red.

"Theo, I've cut myself!" she exclaimed, which baffled Draco, before he realized it the only logical conclusion given what she'd been doing when cursed. No one knew there *was* a curse like this.

She was trying to wipe her hands clean, but the effort only seemed to make them drier for a moment, before the attempt made the curse overcompensate, the crimson starting to drip hard enough to leave thin spidery trails along the side of the table, towards the floor. "Okay, good, yeah, that's what happened when I tried it," Draco whispered to Hermione, trying not to feel the recoiling in his own damned squeamish stomach at what he had just done to a girl who he could not, no matter what he tried, stop thinking of as *his Keeper.*

Millie tried to pick up her wand and it kept slipping through her wet hands. "Theo, try and stop the bleeding, or at least- bandage it so I can get to the Hospital Wing- I can't hold onto-"

"Millie, where is the blood coming from? Did you cut yourself? Both hands?" Theo asked, holding onto her wrists carefully as he stared down at her, face dismaying but not panicked. He instinctively seemed to grasp there was either something heinous or unnatural about this two-handed wound. Pansy looked over, saw Millie bleeding, and shrieked for Slughorn, but Theo didn't move out of the way, drawing his wand and attempting some healing spell Draco didn't know. Which, of course, had no effect, since it wasn't actually a wound at all.

"You're just making it go faster!" Millie shrieked angrily at Theo.

"It's like raindrops now," Theo said, paling as he stared at Millie's endlessly blood-producing hands, caught always red-handed. "Are you- Millie, are you lightheaded?" Millie shook her

head, and Theo seized both her hands and pulled them to him, not seeming to care how it left his own hands and sleeve sullied too. "I can't see where the cuts even are, Millie. Are you sure you were cut? Is that even your blood?"

"I don't know," Millie breathed, and then, "Blaise..."

It was a blessing that Slughorn adjourned class then, to attend to the disaster of the cauldron, and Draco could walk and not run out, albeit walk very quickly, before the Slytherins realized that it was not just Blaise and Millie with these strange not-wounds, like Sectumsempra without real cuts and only on guilty hands, but Smith as well. No one could mistake what that meant. And Draco didn't want to know the way Theo would look at him then.

"I'll look into helping with the curse when I stop getting hate mail," became Draco's mantra, and he stuck to it. As the week advanced, and the three students as well as the professors proved stumped as to how to reverse what the entire school was calling the red-handed curse- Hermione's label of the Macbeth curse had failed to catch on- more people came up to Draco to plead clemency for the interviewees, namely a number of Hufflepuffs for Smith. Slytherins were giving Draco a wider berth than ever, and if he hadn't been hated in that house already, he sure as hell was now. But he hadn't made them speak out of turn against him, and they were the ones who'd nicknamed him Grindelwald. What had they expected? Each time he was asked, even by his own friends, he repeated his new mantra. *I'll help once I stop getting hate mail.*

Millie, Blaise, and Smith had moved into the Hospital Bay, apparently equipped with special gloves to try and absorb the ever-bleeding for a while, but they had to be changed frequently. Meanwhile, Draco was getting a *lot* of hate mail. Flitwick had to call him to his office and gently admonish him for using Incendio to vaporize the letters in the air as they arrived. "You should check at first, they could be legitimate post. And you're scaring the first-years." As for the curse, he only insinuated that he suspected Draco behind it, but of course no one had any proof, and Flitwick didn't outright accuse him. No one did. "I do hope that the victims of the red-handed curse will get better in time," Flitwick merely observed, as he let Draco go.

Saturday saw another red rain, and a more unexpected insertion of red later at football: Ron Weasley, face redder than his hair, plopping himself right in the middle of their regular football game that afternoon, and demanding to be taught and included. Luckily, Luna sometimes came to watch while she worked on her homework, and she was present that day. Unluckily, Ron was a far quicker study than Luna. With Ron as keeper for Dean's team, the slaughter that followed, with Ron, Dean, Ginny, and Hermione vs. Draco, Seamus, Neville, and Luna was one for the history books.

Draco was exhausted and muddy after the match, falling onto his back after the twelfth went in and his watch alarm sounded to end. "Well, it was close," he called up gloomily to an undaunted Luna, chattering to a sour-faced Seamus how much *fun* it was to kick things. "Real nail-biter there. Tight margin of error, could have gone either way."

"I thought you were brilliant," the last voice that Draco wanted to hear, and Draco stayed on the ground, unwilling to accept the reality that any of that had apparently been witnessed by Harry.

Hermione had scored *nine* of her team's goals and gotten off still more shots on target. Ron was complimenting her for this in the distance, in a nervous, admiring tone that Draco recognized even half-dead as Ron Weasley, Ladykiller at work. That explained why Ron had wanted to come in the first place: he'd been hearing Draco call Hermione Striker for so many years. Hermione, who he was likely rapidly discovering was both a girl, and unreasonably pretty at that. So he'd wanted to witness said friend from close range in her full striker glory. And she hadn't disappointed.

Draco in front of Harry? That was another story.

Harry pulled him up with both hands, though, laughing as Draco's head sagged against his shoulder. "You really put yourself all about trying to stop her," he said admiringly. "Look how dirty you are." File that under, phrases that would have been wonderful to hear from Harry's mouth in another context. "Here, Neville brought you all some ice water."

"Did you see me kick Dean?" Luna was asking Neville excitedly in the background, while Neville seemed to lack the nerve to explain to Luna that she shouldn't exactly be proud of kicking shins instead of the football. Seamus had taken some of the ice from Neville's cup and made an ice pack for Dean, rolling down Dean's sock and holding it to his calf, but Dean hardly seemed to feel it, gloating there in his dirt and grass-covered West Ham shirt to his exhausted friend.

Draco took the water and poured it over himself instead, reckoning he couldn't look any worse. He felt ice cubes scatter over him, some falling into his red Arsenal shirt, but it felt good. After a cool and misty summer, it was actually a pretty warm day, the sky without a single cloud beaming down so much direct sun, he had to reek from sweat. The water got some of the grass off him, at least, after so many times diving and hitting the ground parrying Hermione's strikes.

He closed his eyes before he let the rest of the water down right over his head, tasting the ice on his lips, and raked his hand over his face and back through his hair. It slicked it out of his eyes before he opened them, only to see Harry staring at him with the most unabashedly hungry look he had ever seen on that handsome face.

"Can we go to the Room of Requirement now?" Harry whispered, green eyes huge behind his glasses. He pushed them up and stared at Draco all the more intently.

Draco frowned, tired. "Don't we usually go after dinner?" he sighed. "I need a bath *badly*-"

"I want to go now," Harry said louder, drawing a knowing enough snort from Seamus nearby, Draco had the idea Harry's intentions might not exactly be pure.

"This does it for you?" Draco asked incredulously. "Really? I'm a mess." He could hardly think he had looked worse in front of Harry, after a football humiliation to boot, and yet

Harry was eyeing him like the effort not to tear off Draco's clothes right then and there was physically painful.

"Draco," Harry just breathed, broad shoulders tight with tension. When Draco looked down, it seemed Harry's desire was more immediately pressing than he had realized. Draco stepped between them, not wanting anyone else to see just *how* excited Harry apparently got from watching him. "Draco, please, I can't think..."

"See you all later!" Draco gave a middle finger to the hooting and hollering of their friends, Ron the loudest, as he took Harry by the hand and led him into the Quidditch broomshed nearby. "Colloportus," he cast, "Inmotus, tumultum adux, here, are you happy now, Dragonslayer?"

Harry pushed him against the wall of the shed, just like in first year. The déjà vu hit Draco, only now it was not fury animating Harry's gorgeous face, all grown up and wanting. "Why are you so obsessed with me?" Draco teased. "I'm just living my life, and you lose your shit like this..."

"I can't help it," Harry breathed, and his hands went to Draco's shoulders, but they didn't seem to want to stay there. "Can I touch you?" Draco nodded, laughing, and leaned his head back against the rough wood, luxuriating in the feeling. Harry's hands roamed down his wet shirt, and then beneath it, sliding over his wet sides, and Draco let out a little whimper, Harry's need beginning to soak through into Draco's skin with the touch.

"Go ahead," Draco breathed, letting his weight go limp against the wall, Harry's hands the only thing keeping him up. If the Prophet article had put a fissure between him and Harry, it wasn't exactly a readily apparent one. "Touch me, then, you stalker. Just don't expect me to help, I'm *tired*. You're doing *all* the work."

Draco felt very good about life, the plight of the three cursed slanderers far from his mind, as he cleaned up afterwards in the broomshed, having sent Harry on. Ostensibly, he wanted to clean his broomstick, though an objective party might note that Harry had already done that for him. Unofficially, after what they'd done, he needed to fix his hair.

"So," an unimpressed alto voice observed, as Millie's face once again came into view behind him in a mirror. It was his enchanted floating pocket mirror, which she seemed to be eyeing with contemptuous disdain. Millie's sole concession to vanity was an enchanted floating item of her own: a bucket that trailed underneath her dripping hands, which had black gloves on them but seemed to have outstretched their capabilities long ago. "From the sound of that, at least you're getting *something* out of all that betrayal."

Draco winced, turning to face Millie and trying not to look at her large steel bucket. "Please tell me you weren't listening-"

"I didn't *want* to. But everyone knows you play football this time Saturdays," Millie said impatiently, "So I waited for you, but-" She made a face. "I had to wait a little longer than anticipated."

Draco grimaced in open mortification. "I'm sorry, Millie. If I'd known-"

"I have to be quick," Millie said impatiently, "They'll see I've snuck out of the Hospital Bay, and when I try to, Theo always snitches on me. Wants me there to perform his tests and attempts at counter-curses, but they're not working. And if anyone could figure out some obscure blood magic you've done, Draco, I would have thought it would be Theo."

"You told me to do this," Draco said defensively, even though his hand was on the talon wand in his pocket, the counter-curse already on his lips at the sight of such a proud girl reduced to such a ridiculous setup. It reminded him of Hermione with a face full of hair from Mr. Wilberforth.

"I thought you would do *Langlock*!" Millie growled. "What could be more suiting for *tongues that speak ill of Draco Malfoy*, remember? Draco Black," she corrected herself wanly, and reached to flip her short brown hair out of her eyes before seeming to remember that her hands were too sodden. She tossed her head awkwardly instead, tightening the straps on the dripping gloves at her wrists, with the same reflexive ease she used for her Keeper's gloves. They were not unlike them, except for color. "Anyway," she said tightly, "I was just hoping for some kind of timetable for Grindelwald's mercy. Even if that sounds like an oxymoron."

"What's the rush?" Draco asked, trying for flippancy, and her eyes went past him instead to focus wistfully on the racks full of brooms behind him.

"I can't practice," she said, hardly what he had expected.

"You're not on the team-"

"You think I don't know that?" Millie growled, voice full of so much singular resentment for that fact, Draco almost leaped away. "But I-" She looked to feel humiliated to confide so much in him. "What you said about me- going professional- I know you were probably just sucking up, and didn't mean it, but- I've thought about it too, I know it's stupid, but- I practiced all summer, and I've kept practicing at Hogwarts. Just in case there might be a chance someday-"

"Millie, it's not stupid," Draco said, an ache in his throat. "You could absolutely play professional Quidditch. It- it must be hard, practicing alone as a Keeper." The amount of Draco had spent training Ron as a Keeper had showed him how it wasn't ideal to practice for that position even with only one other person, let alone two.

"Well, I'm keeping it up," Millie said, avoiding his gaze, "There's spells and items you can order, to help with it- I've been going off whenever I have a chance, where no one will see me, to keep up my skills- but I'm going to get rusty if this goes too long, so I need to have some kind of idea how much I'm going to be atrophying. That's all."

"A week," Draco said instantly, though he'd planned for longer. "I can't go any shorter than that without defeating the purpose of the gesture." He wanted to say far more, to encourage Millie about her practicing, but it was hard to sound sincere with his curse dripping from her hands.

She nodded, with something like gratefulness on her face. "Theo," she said softly, "Has been following you. All the time. Every moment he can. I don't know why." Then she darted out, bucket straining to follow her hands.

A week, Draco had said, but even that period turned out to be too long, when he had to check in with Severus the next morning. "What," Severus asked the moment he opened the door to him, "Have you done to Mr. Zabini and Miss Bulstrode?"

"It's good to see you too, beloved godfather," Draco said cheerily, twisting his way in past him. "Now I know you didn't want our weekly check-ins to turn into a brunch thing, but Dobby *is* going to drop in with a few croissants. Just a few. Not enough to make a brunch-"

"I have been at the forefront of the professors," Severus said in a no-nonsense deadpan, "Stuck wasting our valuable time attempting to research how to assist the cursed students, when my own godson holds the key to this mystery. And if you attempt to deny for one moment that you are behind this-"

"I won't," Draco said, and brightened when Dobby popped in with a large sack of croissants. "You leave any in the kitchens for the rest of them?"

"No!" Dobby said happily. "Dobby is bringing them *all* for Severus Snape and Draco Black!" The sound of Draco's surname made Severus's face darken, as the already chilly air in the dungeons worsened. "Dobby is coming at a bad time," he said nervously, and suffered a quick hug from Draco before Apparating back out.

Dobby had brought them a total of twenty-seven croissants. "It's a symbol of his devotion," Draco said happily, once Severus had finished counting them out and silently shaking his head. "I'm surprised you haven't managed to figure it out, Severus. Are you covering for me? Or do you mean to tell me you've genuinely failed in uncovering what I've done?"

Severus glowered at him. "No equivocation, vain boy. You clearly wish to brag to your godfather of your feat of dark magic-"

"It wasn't dark magic," Draco blurted, and then squinted. "Um, I'm not sure, actually... I've never really been able to find a book that lays out a clear criteria for these things..."

Severus watched him warily for a moment, and then a look rather like pride came into his eyes. "You invented the spell."

Draco nodded gingerly, and watched Severus try to suppress that pride in favor of professorial disapproval. "What a supreme waste of time," Severus commented mildly.

"I wanted to invent spells by sixth year, Severus," Draco said earnestly, "Like *you* did. I know you'd invented loads and loads by the time you were my age, but I'm going to make more-"

"You invented it," Severus said cautiously, "And now *you* hold the sole key to a counter-curse. Is this the essence of your revenge? The desire to wholly and completely hold the

power?"

Draco bit his lip, not liking that construction. "I was working on the spell before. This just gave me the chance to test it. I mean, Luna volunteered, but I wasn't about to risk *her*, so..."

"So you risked my Slytherins. The next time you try a new spell you have invented, as I am sure you will in unfortunate *abundance*, I ask you test it exclusively on *Gryffindors.*"

"The next time?" Draco echoed, wincing. He had the feeling Severus was more tickled than he would like to admit, having his godson follow in his footsteps like this. But that wouldn't be enough to discharge the duty Severus did feel towards his house. Which, given that Severus had sicced Dementors on the dungeons in third year, could be viewed as hypocritical by an impartial eye. "Are you going to try to talk me into showing mercy? Because really-"

"I ask for nothing," Severus said coldly. "I *command.* If you wish to continue these little *meetings*, Draco, you *will* restore my Slytherins to normal functioning. Immediately after you leave my chambers. Or these doors will remain *permanently* closed to you."

Draco was disappointed but not surprised. "You're holding our godfather-godson bonding time as ransom against me?" he pouted. "You don't mean it. You wouldn't really send me away."

"Try me," Severus intoned flatly, and began to nibble at one of seven almond croissants.

It was an easy enough task to sneak with the invisibility cloak into the medical bay that night, and give the three sinners their reprieve of Vernidemnidas while they slept. He even manfully resisted the urge to give the sleeping Smith an avant-garde haircut on his way out.

"See," Draco said brightly to a long-suffering Severus the next day. "All better in time for the first trip to Hogsmeade."

"Pammaque Periander," Harry read from the large curved face of the gravestone. "1955 to 1995. No inscription." Harry seemed to be waiting for an explanation, and Draco just corrected his pronunciation. "Sorry, but why are we here?"

"I never told you about all this, did I?" Draco realized with a sinking heart.

He sat down on the ground in front of one grave that was, in truth, two: Periander and Maledictum. He'd remembered telling Harry, grouping it with the truth about the Naufragiam. But it had been Hermione who he'd actually confessed all this to. And Harry had learned about the Naufragiam at the same time as the rest of the Order: when Hermione'd had Luna throw it at Voldemort. "It's a long story. Explains why I'm banned from the Divination Tower. I guess the simplest way to explain this is to say that this," he gestured at the graves, "Is my fault."

Harry stared down at the 1995, with caution but not fear in his eyes. "Is this one of your secrets, Draco? One of the reasons you kept saying you weren't good enough for me? You

said-" Harry licked his lips nervously, but when Draco sat down beside Harry on the fading grass, Harry took Draco's hand in his. "Even before Mr. Nott, you said that Pettigrew wasn't the only person you ever killed... here, if you want, you can lie in my lap, I know you like that..."

"You don't think it's disrespectful in a graveyard?" Draco sighed, but reclined his head in Harry's lap, over his crossed thighs and calves. It made it easier to speak of this. "He was a Ravenclaw, like I am now. It's another Ravenclaw's grave..." The solidity of Harry was a comfort. It was even better once Harry began to stroke his hair. It made him feel safe and looked after, like he belonged to Harry. He'd never felt that in the blue loop, during the times Pansy had done this when they'd been supposedly dating. With Pansy, it had just been the animal comfort of touch that made him want to suffer her caresses.

And he and Theo, of course, had never sat this way at all.

"As long you aren't *on* the grave, I think it's fine. You're here to pay respects." Harry said with a smile in his voice. He took the clasp from Draco's hair to run his fingers through unimpeded. It had once been an S clasp with a green eye. Now it was an R one with a blue eye, and it went into the pocket of Harry's down jacket. "Do you want to tell me? Is that why you brought me?"

"I *brought* you," Draco sighed, "Because you insisted on the first Hogsmeade weekend being a date thing, but I knew I had to come here. Ever since I talked about it with the Sorting Hat. I thought he might be buried here, Mr. Periander, since this was his family plot. I wanted to bring flowers, at least." Harry obligingly put the bouquet of snowdrops on the grave. "You just tagged along because that's what you do, you tag along after me..."

"Do I get an explanation?" Harry asked, sounding unperturbed by Draco's prickliness, and when his fingers stroked soothingly over Draco's forehead, it was a struggle not to purr. Maybe he shouldn't have let himself be lulled into sitting this way. It seemed criminal to be enjoying such lavish, affectionate treatment by Harry bloody Potter, while sitting on the grave dirt of his victims. But that was his life these days, the inhabitance of overlapping ironies.

Harry listened with remarkable patience to Draco's recitation of the story of Periander and Maledictum, only interrupting when he needed an explanation of what a Maledictus was. "Luna explained all this to you ages ago," Draco sighed affectionately, but repeated it, before advancing from his magic assessment, to the false letter Periander sent, Maledictum's sickness, Maledictum's burial and the Sordespiro ritual with the moonstone dagger, Trelawney's prophecy over the grave dirt, and finally Severus's report of finding Periander dead, with his will leaving Draco the dagger.

"You might be familiar with it," Draco said wryly, producing it from his pocket and lying it in front of the grave where he had first seen it. "You bought me this beautiful new sheath for it."

"None of that was your fault," Harry said soothingly. Draco let Harry guide his head back to his lap, fingers resuming their stroking and playing with wisps of Draco's sleek hair. "That's why you're so scared of your wand, isn't it? What Periander told you, about how you should give it up- right, he said... even if it meant you didn't have magic anymore, since something worse would..."

"And he was right," Draco said, but too softly for Harry to hear him.

"Do you remember Trelawney's prophecy? She's the one who made the prophecy about me and Voldemort. Do you think what Trelawney predicted for *you* will come true?"

"It did," Draco said, turning his face upwards to look at that handsome face from below, every different angle no less endearing when it came to those wide green eyes. "In a different graveyard, not too long after..."

"The night of the Third Task?" Harry breathed. "What did she predict?"

Draco lost his nerve at the final hurdle. "The rat and the dragon. I wrote it all down exactly, I can show it to you sometime if you want. She predicted that the rat would be swallowed up in the flames of the dragon." He realized just a second after he lied that he'd told Hermione that prophecy right after it, in third year. He would just have to hope they never compared notes.

But there was someone else, part of an entire Divination class who knew that Draco was lying about when he heard that prophecy by Trelawney. Draco couldn't tell whether he was close enough to hear them, but there was no missing who it was. The intruder was standing not far from them. He was almost hidden by a number of taller headstones, but Draco knew him even by his shadow, as he looked up at Harry guiltily and noticed something darker behind him.

"Theo?" Draco called, and the silhouette before the gloomy white sky did not change.

Harry sprung to his feet at the sight of Theo watching them. "Nott? What are you doing here?" he demanded, immediately protective. He put an arm in front of Draco when he got up with him. "Did you follow us? Follow *him*?"

Theo didn't react, just turned on his heel and made to walk away. But Harry pursued him, springing forward with the same alacrity as in the Department of Mysteries. "Where are you going? Why are you following Draco? Nott!"

Draco raced after them, but not quick enough to keep Theo from shoving Harry back. When he saw Theo's face, that dull impassivity that characterized his once-brilliant dark blue eyes during classes was gone, replaced by an intensity of hate only matched by the way Severus had used to look at Sirius. Draco could not tell whether it was for Harry or Draco.

"I can go where I want, Potter," Theo said, voice low and controlled, but tight with repressed aggression.

There was nothing repressed about Harry's aggression. "You can't stalk him! I know you've been following him around! What, are you plotting revenge?" Harry got in Theo's face again, and it felt like a miracle neither of them had drawn their wands. "Stay away from Draco!"

"Harry, it's alright," Draco said, trying to drag Harry back by the arm. Harry didn't budge.

"What has he said to you?" Theo asked intently. There was calculation on his face, likely whether Draco had told Harry about the black dagger, but it was submerged behind the same

twitching tenseness it had worn the last time they'd spoken. Draco didn't want to look at that face like an open wound, on a boy he had once genuinely thought he could fall in love with.

"What are you going to do, Nott?" Harry demanded. "Whatever you're planning, I won't let you hurt him!"

Draco pulled Harry away, but they could see a wary Theo draw his wand, brandished like there was an army of phantoms rising from the graves behind them. The shadows of the afternoon hung longer between them, as the October wind picked up colder.

"Theo," Draco said carefully. "*I* don't want to hurt you. I won't let Harry, either. Theo, I don't want a war between us-"

"There *is* a war," Theo blurted, eyes flashing a venomous poisoned blue. His white-knuckled grip tightened on his wand. "I'll leave you alone if you tell me what you were doing in this graveyard." Theo's gaze went to where the moonstone dagger lay on the grave dirt.

"How about you tell me first," Draco said levelly, "How you knew it was my mother at the citadel, and not Bellatrix Lestrange?" He took Harry's hand, his other hand gripped on the talon wand in his pocket. Theo had to know it would be suicide to take them both on at once. But if he thought he could get the jump on them- or if he was able to call someone else to his side...

"How do *you* think I knew?" Theo asked, the intelligence in those eyes a fearful sight, and it hit Draco for the first time with clarity: *I shouldn't have killed his father because he's* dangerous. *I'll never see him coming. He's too clever for me to have made an enemy*- "That dagger has Bellatrix Lestrange's blood on it, doesn't it? And your father's. What did you enjoy more, Grindelwald? Slashing one hand open, or burning the other off his wrist-"

The talon wand flew out. Now Harry was the one trying to pull Draco back. "He deserved it!" Draco yelled. "He was my father! He was supposed to protect me, not to hurt me-"

"*My* father never hurt me," Theo said more quietly, the pain in his eyes threatening to brim over, before calculation returned to them. "And you... what are you doing with that dagger, Draco Malfoy? I know you get off on blood magic. Whose blood was left on that dagger? Are you targeting Bellatrix Lestrange? Your father? *Who?* How *many* people's blood is on that dagger-"

"Do you want yours?" Draco snapped before he could stop himself, the feeling that had curdled through him before he let it go and cast Cauterizo on his father over and over. "Do you want your blood on it? Accio dagger!" The dagger flew from the ground. Some of the dirt splattered from its surface onto Theo's face as it slapped into Draco's waiting palm, inches from Theo's cheek, so both dagger and wand were brandished at Theo now. "I'm going to kill Bellatrix Lestrange! You can tell her that! You *can*, can't you? Is she your new friend? How many times has she cast Cruciatus on you? If you need more practice at withstanding it, I'd be happy to give you-"

"Draco!" Harry yelled, and dragged him away bodily. Draco only realized then that he was shaking, enough that the dagger was making a strange rattling sound against his palm and

dug-in fingernails. The end of his wand was sizzling in the air, a haze of dark smoke escaping from it. Theo's eyes were huge, thinned face gone ghostly in shock as he stared at its inky shadow.

"Two graves!" Draco exclaimed, staggering backwards with a ghoulish laugh escaping him. He stumbled and fell laughing to sit in front of Periander's grave. "Read it! There's only one name, but there's two graves, Theo, is that what you wanted to know? There will be more graves! *More*! More and more graves!" He dropped the knife but not his wand, turning from Periander's name which even now cut at his very vision like the dagger was back in Periander's dead hand. The talon wand was still spreading shadow into the air.

"Two graves, Theo, two! There's a Muggle saying about that. I got an O on my Muggle Studies exam, you know." Theo had taken a step away, silhouette less like a predator and more like prey. "You want revenge, Theo? For your father? Fine! But there's that Muggle saying: When you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves!"

"Draco," Harry said, stepping between them, "It's alright. Nott, you should leave. Now."

Theo turned on his heel and fled.

Harry bent down to check on Draco, only to sit down quickly, taking Draco in his arms, but to feel in his pockets before embracing him. He found the draught of peace, but Draco was gasping too hard to even try to drink it. The talon wand fell from his hand, shadow dissipating, as his panting face broke apart, and he began to cry, loud and unrestrained wrenching sobs.

Harry managed to help him get his draught down, drop by drop. Then he wrapped his arms around Draco, and held him as he cried and tried to breathe in front of the two graves.

Nine Names

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"So I've dumped Neville," Luna informed Draco, upon his return to the Ravenclaw common room. Harry had taken him back to Hogwarts as soon as he could, and Draco had rested for a while in bed. Now he reemerged only for that blunt statement to greet him.

"What?" Draco said, rubbing his stinging eyes. He'd checked his face in the mirror, and seen a combination of lying down, cold water, and charms make him look normal again. That didn't mean that crying so long hadn't still left his eyes hurting. "What do you mean, dumped?"

"I told him that I was sorry," Luna said, leaning into Hermione's comforting touch, "I didn't think a romantic relationship was working between us. But I hoped we could still be friends."

"In my opinion," Hermione said protectively, "Luna was *kind* about it. Neville *stood her up.*"

"What?" Draco breathed, and dropped down to hug his cousin's other side. "You were so excited about your date! You got all dressed up!" Luna was still in the flowy pink and blue dress he had helped her pick, but she'd taken her hair out of the complicated updo they'd done. It hung limply in its great mass around her, looking as glum as Luna. "How could he do that to you?"

"Don't curse him, Draco," Luna sighed, sniffling a bit. "It wasn't his fault. There was an emergency at the Herbology greenhouses, just as he had to leave to meet me. He came when he could. It's not like he *wanted* to- Professor Sprout made him stay-"

"He should have *murdered* Sprout, in *cold blood*," Draco pronounced ominously, "Sooner than allow her to make him *stand you up*- you must have been so humiliated-"

"It's okay, really, Hermione came by and saw me alone at the Three Broomsticks," Luna sighed, "She waited with me," and snuggled against her big sister figure. "If it had been just that, I wouldn't have broken it off over it. But it just... it just kind of drove in what I've been thinking all along. That he's just not very interested in me. He's not half as invested as I am."

"Neville does like you, though, Luna. He talks about you all the time," Ron said weakly, and Draco jumped. He hadn't even noticed his other friend's presence in a chair behind the couch, he'd been so uncharacteristically quiet. It seemed that when it came to romantic drama, Ron knew to stay well enough out of the way. "But I think he has trouble showing it sometimes-"

"That's not *her* fault!" Hermione exclaimed, turning on him with such unprovoked vehemence, it was no wonder he'd been slightly cowering already. "Luna has been more than open about how she feels about him! It's humiliating for her to keep putting herself out there if he never reciprocates! It must make her feel so unwanted, like he doesn't even like her at all!"

Somehow, Draco suspected she might be speaking about more than just Neville and Luna.

"You do have a more forceful personality than him, Luna," Draco reasoned out. "I mean, even though people might expect him to be the one who's bold, because he's older, and yes, because he's a boy- I'm saying that's people's *expectations*, Hermione, don't worry, I'm not being heteronormative- you'll probably have always to be the one to take the lead. But I do agree that if you're putting all of yourself into it, and he keeps not giving *anything* back, you shouldn't wait around for him to get his shit together." Ron gave Draco a look, only to quickly stop, folding his hands and trying to look innocent, once his glare earned him a glare from Hermione in turn.

Neville didn't bother trying to look innocent the next day, letting Draco approach him after breakfast with an air of deflated resignation. Somehow, it looked like someone had managed to have an even worse Hogsmeade date than he had. "Hi, Draco," Neville said gloomily. "Whatever you're going to do, I deserve it. I won't try and stop you. Not that I could if I wanted to, but-"

"Come on, Longbottom," Draco sighed, "Let's go talk somewhere else," and Neville shot a brief, panicked look back towards the Gryffindor table.

"Tell my parents I love them!" Neville called over to Dean before they left the Great Hall.

"We're just going for a walk to the Great Lake," Draco said, rolling his eyes, "Not the underworld," but Neville looked convinced this was a death march. "Oh, for Salazar's sake," he groaned. When they reached the lakeshore, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the talon wand and moonstone dagger. Neville squeaked fearfully at the sight. The boy who was meant to slay Nagini in the space of less than two years was not exactly apparent yet.

"Is this some kind of trick?" Neville said fearfully.

"It's like you said, Neville," Draco said impatiently, gesturing to take them. "If I wanted to destroy you, I could without any tricks needed."

"Maybe you want to toy with me first," Neville whimpered. "And then you'll-"

"Neville! Take my wand and dagger so you don't feel so nervous!"

Finally, Neville did, and Draco was pleased to see the wand didn't burn him, though Draco had been sure it wouldn't. Well. Relatively sure.

"I just want to talk to you about Luna. I thought the two of you were good together, but somehow you've bollocksed it all up. I don't mean by standing her up. I know how that

happened. If you'd been at fault there, we wouldn't be *having* this discussion. I mean that we have to have the same conversation as before- you don't make her feel *special*, Neville."

"It's for the best," Neville mumbled. "It's not like I was ever good enough for her anyway-"

If this was how it had felt to his friends when Draco talked about not being good enough for Harry, then Draco heartily thanked them all for resisting the urge he currently battled, to drag Neville into the lake and offer him up to any Grindylows interested in fresh Gryffindor meat.

"Don't say that. Everyone has their insecurities and shit they've done wrong. But if someone else likes you, they're the ones who get to decide if you're good enough or not. Because if they care about you, if you're the one they're hung up on anyway... then by saying that, in the end all you're saying is that what they *deserve* is to be alone."

"Luna could find someone else anytime," Neville said sadly. "She's so pretty and so cool..."

"Do you ever tell *her* that?" Draco prodded. "That *you* think she's pretty and cool?" Ashen-faced, Neville shook his head. "Bloody hell, Neville! How hard is it? Just say those words!"

"I don't know." Neville buried his face in his hands. "My dad gave me all this advice about how to charm a girl. But it all seems so unnatural. And Luna always seems so confident..."

"She's not," Draco said. It didn't feel like a betrayal of his cousin to say something that should be so blatantly obvious. "She definitely isn't, Neville. And you're the one she likes. No one else." Even if there was still some part of Luna holding onto her memories with Tom Riddle, Draco didn't think he exactly counted. "And this isn't the end. You can get her back, if you can prove to her that you'll be different. That when she's affectionate, you'll be affectionate back."

"How do I do that?" Neville said, face rising with a more Gryffindorish look of hope.

"Give her some time to cool off," Draco advised.

He couldn't believe he was giving relationship advice. Yes, he was one of the only ones of his friends actually in a currently functioning relationship. But that was more Harry's doing. Being with the Amortentia-soused octopus was more like being run over with a freight train.

"And make a big romantic gesture. I'm not going to tell you what. It has to be from the heart, Neville. Come up with some big display to prove you really do care."

Neville agreed, though when Draco advised that he do it publicly, Neville almost looked like he would prefer to climb into the Great Lake himself and inquire after the Grindylows' diet.

In the meantime, Luna took her first ever breakup as an excuse to turn to dark magic. Really.

It *was* the kind of thing that a cousin of Draco's would do.

It started innocuously enough, when Luna peppered him with questions about Hermione's dueling lessons over the summer. Somehow that turned into further dueling lessons in the Room of Requirement on Mondays, once Luna demanded that they teach her at least everything Hermione had learned. Luna had argued that the Order said she was one of the Dark Lord's prime targets, so it was imperative she could defend herself. That was hard to argue with.

The dark magic only came into play in the session itself, when Draco began in that smooth oval dueling room by asking Luna if there was anything in particular she wanted to learn. "I saw you conjure a snake once," she said brightly. "I remember it had lovely scales. And I've heard that you can conjure snakes to choke someone, that might be useful as well-"

"Luna!" Hermione exclaimed severely. "I didn't tell you about that so *you* could learn it. If we're going to have a Rat Thieves practice, there will be no dark magic! That is a hard and fast rule."

Luna's eyes narrowed. "Says the person," she said mildly, "Who came up with the plan to use Naufragiam. Naufragiam the *blood magic potion.*"

Hermione flushed, crossing her arms. "It was already done. Luna, I know you're frustrated after what happened with Neville, but dipping your toe into those waters is not the way-"

"What's the point distinguishing between light and dark?" Luna complained. "If a spell is useful, it's useful. We're up against Death Eaters, *they'll* use any spell they can. Why shouldn't we?"

"Because then you'll end up killing someone!" Hermione yelled, only to go very still.

Luna did as well. Their gazes travelled to Draco, who also stood there motionless.

"Oh, Draco, I'm sorry," Hermione said awkwardly. "I didn't mean..."

"No, you're right," Draco said dully. "If I teach you Serpensmorta or Sectumsempra, let alone some other things I know, they *are* likely to be deadly-"

"I don't mind that," Luna said calmly, and Hermione's eyes widened. She looked between Luna and Draco, as if wondering how far Luna would be willing to go in following the example of her beloved cousin. "Hermione, don't you think that sometimes it's kill or be killed? I'm sorry, Draco, but if we hadn't stopped you from killing Pettigrew back when we first unmasked him, think of everything that wouldn't have happened..."

"That would have been killing in *cold blood*. But the ends justify the means?" Hermione said tensely. "Have you been giving *Luna* Machiavelli to read?"

"No," Draco said, and wished he'd asked the Room for chairs. He sank down and leaned his back against the wall, rubbing his eyes. "How did we get into a moral debate here, Striker? I just thought we were going to be showing Luna a few shielding charms or something."

Luna sat down beside him, looking pouty. "Why is it alright for you, then?" Hermione sat down on Draco's other side, and he ended up glowered at between them. "Why, Hermione? Why will you let him get away with it and not me?"

"Draco already knew dark magic before we ever met him," Hermione said defensively. "Have you heard about the duel he had with Harry in our first year? And what he did to Seamus when he-"

"Hermione," Luna said with an edge in her voice. "I opened the Chamber of Secrets and loosed the Basilisk on the school. The Basilisk that petrified *you.* I was possessed, but I *did* it with these hands." She turned up her palms as if there should be a red there. "And it *was* me who fell in love with a monster. If it was too late for Draco when you met him... Hermione, when you met me, it was too late for me, too."

"Oh, Luna," said Hermione, and hugged her tightly, looking distressed for her and overwhelmed with care. From Luna's baffled face, it was not the reaction she'd been expecting.

"Luna-Luna, you're so cute," Draco said, and cuddled her from the other side. "Oh, Striker, couldn't we teach her a bit of dark magic? Just a little?"

"You should learn it too, Hermione," Luna said eagerly. "Are you really even *that* against dark magic for your own reasons, or just because it's what it says in books-"

"*Remus* says it," Hermione said, though her voice was weak. "Remus didn't want Draco even to do it. And Remus knows what he's talking about more than anyone-"

"Remus is a werewolf," Luna argued. "He suffered so much from that. And if anyone would be blocked from seeing the potential usefulness of the dark arts, it would be him-"

"You're both right, okay? Please don't fight," Draco said wearily. "I was enjoying the love fest we had going on too much. Cuddles?" Luna and Hermione both huffed but cuddled together again. Draco let himself be lulled by the familiar feel of their hair, Luna's long and wispy and Hermione's bushy and thick. These were the two girls that meant home to him, even if their words could hurt more than anyone else's. "It's a matter of degrees. No one's agreed on what counts as dark and what isn't. Some people class all curses as dark, but we learn those in school- I'm not trying to make a moral relativism argument. I just... do you want to know why *I* use the dark arts?"

Luna nodded eagerly, while Hermione listened more warily. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I enjoy it," Draco said, to Hermione's indignant little squeal. "Who wouldn't? It feels good to be powerful. But there's a *reason* to be powerful. Nine reasons." Draco took a deep breath, then touched Hermione's shoulder. "Hermione Granger." He touched Luna's shoulder. "Luna Lovegood." He took his hand off and showed two fingers, then began to count on them. "Harry Potter. Ron Weasley. Neville Longbottom. Dobby. Sirius Black. Remus Lupin. Severus Snape. There's a war coming, a war already being fought, and I'm going to get the nine of you through it. Come hell or high water, and I mean it, come *hell*. Bring hell and I'll burn that too. I don't care if the rest of the *world* burns to the ground, as long as I keep that nine alive-"

"What about Ginny?" Luna asked a bit sadly. She had sidled even closer to Hermione, and taken her hand at the unexpected darkness in Draco's voice.

"I'd like it if all the Weasleys could live," Draco said honestly, "Especially Fred and George, you know that. But the reason I study dark magic- why I study *Grindelwald*- why I will study anything under the *sun* that can make me more powerful, is because of those nine names. I'm a Ravenclaw now. What do Ravenclaws believe in? Wit beyond measure, right, Luna? *Knowledge.* The more I know, the more I can protect all of you. Yeah, bodies haven't been dropping yet, but believe me, it's coming. And once the Dark Lord fully understands what we did to him with the Naufragiam? I know it will be a struggle to keep all of us alive. Especially Luna."

"Oh my God," Hermione said softly, squeezing Luna's hand back. Luna leaned her head on the taller girl's shoulder, brief animosity vanished.

"I would do anything," Draco said steadily, "To keep those nine names alive walking around the world, above the ground. If dark magic taints me, if it *ruins* me- then that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make. I'll *be* evil if it means the war ending with all of you alive. I tortured my own mother for that. I'd kill for that- but I've already proven that. I'd do any spell under the sun. I would sell my *soul* for that a hundred times over!" Draco was practically yelling at the pale silent girls, so he fought to control his voice. "I'd rather be as different from my family as I can. But I'll be the *same* as them, and I'll be *glad*, if that's what it takes to protect those nine names from them."

None of them spoke for a while. Luna was watching Hermione, waiting with her mind already made up, while a war waged on Hermione's face. Then Hermione stood up abruptly, a new resolution on her face. "Teach me," she said, voice both eager and reluctant. "You don't have to fight alone, Draco. If that's how you *have* to fight- I won't leave you to it alone." She took a deep breath, as if she couldn't believe herself, then blurted, "Please, Draco, teach us dark magic. Just-"

"What?" Draco said, his sense of a deadly victory fading with that one qualifier.

"Just don't say nine names," Hermione corrected in her adorable know-it-all tone that would brook with no disagreement. Luna and Draco stood up with her, an ear-splitting grin on Luna's face, while Draco watched more cautiously. "Say ten, Frankenstein, you have to."

"I told you, Ginny isn't-"

"You have to count your own name," Hermione said firmly. "I will. *Ten* names. Draco Lupin Black. I'll fight with you, Draco. But you have to add that name to the list."

The next day, Harry came to them during Herbology with more stories of lessons with Dumbledore, teaching him about the Dark Lord's past. Draco would have preferred to hear about *Dumbledore's* past, personally, but he still took out his sixth notebook and recorded them faithfully, imploring for Harry to recall in the most detail he could. "I don't think this is in the spirit of how Dumbledore intends them," Hermione said disapprovingly.

"We don't *know* how Dumbledore intends them," Ron countered. "It's a scary thought, the boy You-Know-Who. But I still don't get why Dumbledore's showing you all this. I mean, it's really interesting and everything, but what's the point?"

"Knowledge," Hermione said quietly, exchanging looks with Draco. "The more knowledge you have, the more likely you are to find a weapon that can be useful. Or the weak points, right? And I think it sounds fascinating... yes, it makes absolute sense to find out as much about Voldemort as possible."

"Are you going to help with the Snargaluff, Frankenstein, or keep working on You-Know-Who's bloody unauthorized biography?" Ron groused. "You haven't even put your gloves on."

Draco put on his best devoted cousin expression. "Harry won't want to repeat it. But Luna will want to hear everything about Tom Riddle, you know that. *Everything*. She'll be spitting mad if I don't have it to tell her later." He regretted the expression when Neville turned out to have been listening. He'd been at the front of the class, Sprout's prize student helping with a demonstration, but he'd come back to his own Snargaluff. News of his ex-girlfriend seemed to make even good honest Neville Longbottom's ears perk up.

"Is Luna still... is she still having trouble dealing with all that?" Neville asked earnestly. "Does she think about it a lot? What happened to her with the Chamber of Secrets?"

He'd accidentally betrayed Luna's confidence. But it was a conclusion Neville should have reached just by logic, let alone by spending as much time with Luna as he had. "If you still have to ask that question, Neville, then you don't get Luna at all."

Hermione hastily changed the subject, telling stories about the Slug Club dinners that Harry had been missing for his lessons. Ron did not seem to enjoy her mentioning McLaggen, which Draco filed away as interesting. He put on his protective goggles, lamenting time travel if it made him have to deal not once but twice with these useless Snargaluff monstrosities, and got to work.

Or rather, he tried. The minute they leaned towards the gnarled stump, the vines sprang out like an underbrush of thick brambles. As in the blue loop, Draco found himself instinctively backing away. This time, he was hiding behind Ron instead of Theo.

"I hate working with you in Herbology," Ron grumbled.

When Draco saw the vines tangling in Hermione's hair, though, he seized up a pair of secateurs and launched himself into battle. "Oh, you'll protect her but not me," Ron whined, while Harry did his hero thing and conquered the rest of the vines.

"I'll protect her *hair*," Draco said haughtily. "I happen to understand the importance to those with long hair of- ow!"

"Draco, a little help here?" Hermione said after elbowing him. Her face indicated that she was grateful that Draco was willing to 'sell his soul to save her' and all, but that she would at the moment prefer him being willing to pull his weight in Herbology. It was rather like that

Muggle quote on Mr. Granger's office wall: *The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of a mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.*

So Draco lived humbly. With a grimace like he was climbing straight into hell, he plunged his hand into the hole in the Snargaluff. When the others helped him get his arm free, he found he had managed to recover a pod like Neville had in the demonstration. It had been Blaise to do his in the blue loop. He supposed if he sat NEWTs for Herbology, this would come in handy. That was, if Aunt Bella hadn't razed the greenhouses to the ground by then.

They set to work squeezing out the unctuous substances from the pod, while Hermione began to speak again briskly, unperturbed by her hair's near personal Waterloo. Draco would have been useless after that for at least a two to three day period. "Anyway, Slughorn's going to have a Christmas party, Harry, and there's no way you'll be able to wriggle out of this one because he actually asked me to check your free evenings, so he could be sure to have it on a night you can come. And really, it wouldn't be kind for you to leave Draco hanging, *he's* going, and you won't want him taking someone *else* as a date-"

"I'm *coming* to that party!" Harry exclaimed, apoplectic at the mere thought. He drove both hands hard into the pod to puncture it, while Ron had been trying hard but only squashing it ineffectually. There was a metaphor there somewhere. "You're *not* going with anyone else-"

"Stop weaponizing Harry's debilitating jealousy to get what you want," Draco whined, quite hypocritically. "Um, actually, Harry, since Neville and Luna broke up, I was planning to take Luna so she could go... it's not like we won't both still be going, so..."

"So this is another party just for Slughorn's favorites, is it?" Ron glowered.

"You are *not* turning me down for *another* Christmas date in favor of your cousin!" Harry yelled, while in the background, Sprout looked nonplused to have some of her best students more occupied with relationship drama than her demon plants. "We're out and everything and you still..."

Harry looked like it had just become his life's mission not to defeat the Dark Lord, but to get Neville Longbottom his girlfriend back. Which, objectively, might be the more difficult task.

"The party's just for the Slug Club, yes," said Hermione, and Ron also looked mutinous.

"Oh, just for the Slug Club," Ron imitated her, in a rather poor falsetto impression, though Draco found himself disloyal enough that it made him laugh nonetheless.

"Look, I didn't make up the name 'Slug Club'," Hermione began primly, looking sick of the lot of them, but Ron was relentless.

"Slug Club," Ron sneered. "It's pathetic. Well, I hope you enjoy your party. Why don't you try getting off with McLaggen, then Slughorn can make you King and Queen Slug-"

"We're allowed to bring guests," Hermione said, her face as red as it had been when fleeing from the Department of Mysteries. It seemed to take her more courage to ask than to face

Death Eaters, but she asked. "And I was going to ask you to come, but if you think it's that stupid then I won't bother!"

Harry looked supremely awkward, beginning work on the pod so noisily he was clearly trying to save himself from having to listen. He cut a sharp contrast with Draco, who'd sidled closer not to miss a word. As well as Neville, who seemed to have gained a taste for eavesdropping.

"You were going to ask me?" Ron asked, sounding gobsmacked. Draco tried not to pump his fist in victory yet. Ron could stick his foot in his mouth even if you put Locomotor bloody mortis on him first.

"Yes," Hermione said, especially pretty when she was this miffed, and Ron did not seem insensible of that fact. "But obviously if you'd rather I *got off with McLaggen*..."

The only sound for a moment was Harry whacking at the pod with a trowel. "Ssh!" Draco hissed, grabbing Harry's arm. "Quiet! You're ruining the mood! If you wreck this for them..."

"No, I wouldn't," Ron said quietly, but that seemed all the commitment he could muster.

"What Ron means to say," Draco said with forceful clarity, "Is that he'd love to go to the Christmas party with you. Isn't that right, Ron?"

"Yeah," Ron mumbled, and both he and Hermione looked down, bashful but pleased.

Draco tried to take Ron aside after Herbology, but Harry snagged him first. It wasn't to harp about the Slug Club date for them, though, but rather Ron and Hermione. "What was that with the two of them? Do you think they like each other?"

"Where have you *been*? Do you really waste all your time staring moonily into my eyes, Casanova, and not noticing anything around you? I've been trying to get them together for *years*-"

"This has not been going on that long," Harry said furiously, though he had to be thinking of the Yule Ball fiasco with those two at least a little. "And I do not *stare moonily in your eyes*-"

"You're right, it's probably not my *eyes* you're staring at," Draco said nonchalantly. "Well, they fancy each other, Harry, they have for a while- no, they haven't said, they haven't *had* to- and *I* think they should be a couple-"

"You're just saying that because they're the leftovers."

"Rude," Draco sniffed. "My best friend is no one's *leftover*-"

"I mean out of the six of us, you know, you, me, Ron, Hermione, Luna, Neville. They're the two left who haven't dated, so you just think they should pair up by default, right?"

"No." Draco rolled his eyes. But he couldn't explain that they had been in the blue loop. By that rationale, Harry should still end up with Ginny. If Draco needed anything to spoil his day, that was a good thought for it.

Ron and Hermione showed no signs of anything changed or bringing them closer. If anything, they were more stiff and formal. "We'll just have to wait to see what happens under the influence of Butterbeer," Harry whispered to Draco a few days later, "In Slughorn's dimly lit room on the night of the party," and laughed as Draco whacked his arm.

"Pervert," Draco hissed, and gave him a look through his eyelashes. "I guess that's why you're hellbent on having me as your date, isn't it? Wanting to try your luck, Chosen One?"

Harry leaned in for a kiss. Draco made a *tsk, tsk* sound, pulling just out of reach at the last moment. Harry tried again, and Draco withdrew again. Harry pouted, and Draco laughed and kissed him.

Before securing dates for Christmas, there was Halloween. It had been Luna's idea, seeing how hospitable Flitwick had been with Hermione's birthday party, to see if he would let them throw a Ravenclaw Halloween party. Flitwick had been enthused by the idea, especially when Draco put forward his idea for a more mature festivity than the one in the Great Hall: a Samhain masquerade.

"I didn't think wizards dressed up for Halloween like Muggles do," was Harry's first comment. He had to suffer Hermione's exhaustive explanation of the history of Samhain and the mumming that accompanied the supposed arrival of fairies and spirits, as the veil thinned between this world and the next. It *was* rather interesting, though, what she explained about the corresponding Mexican Day of the Dead and its calacas, often in the form of masks of skulls and the dead, suggesting that the origin of the mumming was to mimic and fit in with the night's otherworldly visitors. Even if Ron and Harry seemed to fall half-asleep by the time she was done.

Harry got more interested, though, after telling Sirius and Remus about it in his two-way mirror, and finding out that his father had attended a few such Samhain masquerades, although those had been proper bonfires, not in a common room. James Potter had a beautiful stag mask he wore to them, along with the traditional hooded dark cloak and black suit. Harry unwrapped the mask that Sirius sent with glee at the Gryffindor table, attracting many admiring stares. The first time he put it on, Draco had to fight off the reminder of Trelawney's prophecy. He told himself it had already unfurled, and he should just enjoy his boyfriend supporting his creative endeavors.

Before they could attend to party business, there was the exhaustive examination to undergo of Draco's favorite book for anything useful, *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate*. Luna had finally gotten it back from Severus, and proudly returned it to Draco.

"How did you get this?" Draco asked in amazement.

"I asked," Luna said, and Hermione and Draco boggled at her. "And asked again. Over and over. Every day, for the entire semester. I think he just got sick of me asking."

Draco ruffled her hair affectionately, and proclaimed that never had a man been more proud of his favorite cousin. And while Hermione pronounced her continued repugnance for the book, he caught her alone with it once, staring at a page about an aphrodisiac ritual. It gave him one of the best laughs of his life, as she dropped the book and began to stammer excuses like he'd caught her in the process of stabbing a first-year.

"You already have your Amaranthium, Striker, you don't need more magic," Draco teased, "Maybe you should wear it to ask Ron to the masquerade... you are going to ask him, aren't you?"

While she whacked him mightily with one of his Ravenclaw-blue pillows, he was not wrong. Thereafter, Hermione alternated between costume planning, inviting Ron out of the side of her mouth with deliberate casualness and fleeing as soon as he agreed, and blood magic research. So it was that the Rat Thieves spent half their time examining the darkest rituals known to humanity, and the other half planning for the girls to dress up as Greek goddesses. Draco had insisted.

Unfortunately, a Greek God look for a man seemed to involve a toga, which hardly excited Draco. He had to abandon them on his own group costume idea, and go off on a different path. He got serious side-eye from Hermione when he revealed his plans to dress up as the mythical fallen angel Astaroth, complete with dark raven angel wings, but Luna clapped her hands in glee. Draco couldn't remember if she knew the history of that name and the talon wand, but knowing her, it might not have mattered either way. "Oh, he's the one who rides a dragon! And he carries snakes, I think he conjures them, it's perfect..."

Harry hardly looked more pleased than Hermione when Draco told him. They'd been curled up in the Gryffindor-red armchair for some time, with Harry tired after Quidditch practice and Draco after football, but neither too tired to make out lazily, luxuriating in the feel of each other. Draco's description of himself as a fallen angel troubled Harry enough to make his hands slide off Draco's waist.

"What," Draco whined. "Is it too on the nose?" He couldn't remember if Harry knew the Astaroth story either. How did people keep track of these things?

"Is that how you see yourself?" Harry asked, looking genuinely troubled. "You're dressing up Luna and Hermione as goddesses, but you, you're some demon fallen from grace? Not a god-
"

"*I* can't exactly be a goddess," Draco said drolly, "I don't have the *figure* for it," but he didn't seem able to make Harry laugh. He considered asking if Harry knew about the talon wand and Antipodean Opaleye, but Harry had more immediate fears.

"It scared me, you know," Harry admitted in a sharp exhalation of breath, a clouded look in his green eyes like he had been weighing saying this for a while. "What happened in the graveyard, Draco. It really scared me."

Draco's throat tightened. "You mean the way I snapped and threatened him? The panic attack? The weird dark shadows that came out of my wand for fun? Or the part where I lay on your lap in a graveyard? You're going to have to specify, Harry, it was a pretty fucked-up

afternoon." Harry still looked worried. "Come on, Harry, you're dressing up the way your father would. Let me dress up like *my* father." Still no laugh. "Of course, Father isn't nearly that adept with hellfire-"

"Stop," Harry breathed, taking his face in both hands. "You're not really evil, dragon. Even if you like pretending to be. If it's just because you think it's cool or sexy, sure, wear whatever you want. But don't think you have to always be the demon in the room."

Draco's heart constricted. "You're telling the person whose dormmates have to navigate their morning routines around a board covered in clippings about Grindelwald," he quipped.

Harry's lips twisted, though when Draco pouted and pursed his lips out childishly for a kiss, Harry obliged him. When he pulled back, he had that sex-haze in his stare as well as the worry. "You *are* getting obsessed with the Deathly Hallows, aren't you?"

Draco seized upon the distraction. "Which one of the Hallows would you want, dragonslayer?"

Harry's cheeks colored with a distracted look at the word dragonslayer, as Draco had known they would. They almost always did. "The Resurrection Stone," he said, as Draco had also expected. "So I could see my parents again. You?"

"Hermione hasn't told you?" Draco drawled. "Guess you don't pump her for information about me as much as I feared. The Resurrection Stone for me as well."

"Why?" Harry asked softly, fingers playing with wispy strands of Draco's hair around his face. Draco loved him so much he wished he could tell him the truth.

"So I could help you see your parents again," he lied simply, and earned a kiss for the lie. Then he was seized with another truthful impulse, and added, as honestly as he could, "And so when- if- *if* I lose anyone really important to me in this war..." *Nine names*. "If anyone I care about is killed, I can try and bring them back."

The trouble with teaching Hermione Granger dark magic was that she was so damn meticulous about it. When she discovered that he didn't know, or rather didn't remember, all the counter-curses to the curses he was teaching them, she forbade him in horror from showing them to them again until he was fully prepared to undo them. "We're just practicing on dummies," he whined, but she was implacable.

"We won't always be," she said, arms crossed. "Go and find out."

He didn't have the heart to tell her that with at least some of these curses, he didn't think there *were* counter-curses.

So their Monday Rat Thieves dueling practice let out earlier than usual, with Draco on a mission. He was not virtuous enough to go to the library for the hard slog of research, though, especially as it would likely require access to the Restricted Section that he'd have to beg off

of Slughorn. His steps took him naturally to the dungeons, to try Severus first. He'd just been there yesterday for their weekly check-in. Severus would likely grumble, but even he had to concede that seeing his godson a bit more than allowed was worth it, if it taught his godson's friends how to, say, put his bones back in his body, should an Ossius dispersimus ever miss the dummy.

He would have just gone to Severus's chambers, expecting to knock on the door and perhaps wait some time before a cranky Severus deigned to acknowledge him. But as he passed the Potions storeroom, he saw a tall figure sneaking out with a large sack, looking around so nervously it was obvious he was a thief with stolen goods. It piqued Draco's curiosity, of course. Even before he saw the sandy blond hair, and saw that darting head turn towards the dungeon labyrinth. Towards Severus's chambers.

So that's why Severus keeps telling me Theo's not a Death Eater was Draco's first thought, even before he started following Theo along the stone halls with their swimming murky light. He bit down instinctual rage, tried to focus on trailing Theo as quietly as possible. He just focused his eyes on Theo's back, straight and proud as any pureblood's back should be, no matter how tired he was these days. But maybe it was that tiredness that made it so Theo didn't notice Draco, or he wouldn't have done what he did when he reached Severus's door.

Draco half-expected him to gain automatic admittance, from a waiting Severus or already lowered wards, or else knock and be admitted by the man himself. There would even be explanations for that outside of Severus's betrayal, difficult as the sheer sight would be to stomach.

But none of that happened. Theo drew out his wand and began to cast spells, beginning with the ineffective Alohomora. He seemed to do it just to check it off a list, and proceeded to cast a series of unlocking and forced entry spells. It seemed he had another place he wanted to break into, which was proving more difficult than the storeroom. Relief at the reprieve from an expected betrayal by Severus was replaced by protectiveness over him. Stealing from Draco's godfather was the *best* construction Draco could put on Theo's motives to try and break inside.

"Need a hand?"

Theo's head whirled, only to turn to a statue at the sight of the boy he had recently told they were *at war*. Rather than answer, he dropped the sack he had taken from the Potions storeroom and cast Evanesco, losing his haul but destroying any evidence in the process. As if Draco had needed any more evidence of ill intent. Then Theo met Draco's gaze with a stiff nod before brushing past him.

Draco was the one frozen at Theo's temerity, and then he followed him again. He yelled Theo's name, but there was no answer. He cast Homenum revelio on the dungeon labyrinth and saw Theo's outline still present, though he'd gotten a head start. Not enough of one, though. When Draco rounded a corner and caught sight of Theo a few rows away, he cast Impedimenta without speaking or blinking, and saw Theo stumble and slow.

He caught up to Theo and tried to grab him, but Theo kept stalking away, the impact of the Impedimenta wearing off. "Theo!" he yelled, lunging forward and finally catching hold.

"What were you doing?" He wanted to scream *Were you going to hurt my godfather*- maybe to hurt Draco by it- but if his progressively worsening suspicions about Theo were true, the last thing he should do was admit there was still a very strong attachment between himself and the supposed Death Eater. "What were you stealing? What were you trying to steal?"

Theo simply didn't answer, deep blue eyes distant. Draco let go of Theo to roll up his own sleeves. Theo frowned in bemusement at the sight of Draco's pale unblemished wrists. "There," Draco said crisply. "Your turn."

Theo's face twisted in understanding. He turned his head away and began to walk again. "Show me your left wrist!" Draco demanded, pursuing him, the kind of single-minded fury in him that had the talon wand purring hot in his pocket. "Show me *now*!"

"I don't need," Theo said, "To prove anything to you," and Draco lunged. Theo dodged him and ran.

"Show me!" Draco yelled. "Show it to me, Theo! *Show* it to me!"

He caught up by the time they reached the end of the labyrinth, but Theo went straight in the direction of the Slytherin common room. "Everte statum!" Draco yelled, throwing Theo in the direction of the stairs instead. Which Theo took as an invitation to flee up them.

If Theo had gone somewhere public into a group of people, that would have been the end of it, at least for now. But Theo kept racing up staircases, taking stairs two at a time and nearly falling. Draco kept following until they made it to the fifth floor, and past the statue of Boris the Bewildered. Theo disappeared into the prefect's bathroom, hissing the password so Draco couldn't hear it. Did Theo think that would stop Draco from following him in? If so, he could catch him unawares... Severus had told Flitwick about his need for infusions for magical exhaustion, and gave him all the passwords as if he was a prefect...

Draco cast Expelliarmus the moment the door opened. Theo ducked, and the red light hit the painting of the mermaid, woken from sleep with an indignant shriek. A Stunner flew back at him from Theo. Draco shielded wordlessly, and the impact of its blast hitting the white marble well left scorch marks and set the air vibrating, the massive candle-lit chandelier rocking above them. Theo shot another Stunner and missed, hitting the pipes. The large bath had been empty, but now a pipe burst and began to spray water everywhere at breakneck pace, into the water and both of them.

"Ventus duo!" Draco screamed, taking advantage, and blew the blast of water right into Theo's face. He flew back against the wall, shield barely holding against Draco's following Stunner. Draco pursued him, and he stumbled down into the bathtub, slipping on the wet marble falling out of Draco's range. Draco's Expelliarmus flew over Theo's head, and then Draco jerked away as he was caught by a cutting curse, flying up from below. It left a nasty gash in his arm, pain screaming through every nerve on that side of his body. Draco retreated, running over to crouch behind the pile of towels to cast Vulnera satentur. He did not know if the curse had been Sectumsempra, but it might have been. Theo could already mean to kill him.

Almost just as the bloodflow stopped, the towels before Draco caught on fire. Draco had to laugh, then, in an echo that reverberated around the already wrecked room, at Theo thinking to use fire against him. "Lacarnum inflamari!" Draco yelled. His fire set off on the burning rack of towels and supplies, and then he made them fly outwards, hitting the diving board and setting that off too. He tossed the burning debris aside and just extracted the pure flame to throw at Theo. "Lacarnum inflamari! Lacarnum inflamari!"

Sprays of water shot through the fireballs Draco loosed through the air, from faucets being destroyed, bursting with surreal ease, one at what seemed simple air pressure from steam and fire. They put some of the fire out, but more exploded against the pipes and set them off too, bubbles and oils of every unctuous smell leaking out into the brimstone-colored chamber. Draco turned the talon wand inside his sleeve, trusting it to stick there, and took flame in both hands, feeling it coil in his fingers, and threw.

He found Theo backed against the opposite wall, watching him stride through the chaos of water and smoke and fire like a demon coming for him. "Protego!" Theo called desperately, as his wordless shield could only strain to hold back the fire. Fireballs impacted against the orb of Theo's Protego and lined it, dripping down it turning it to a molten orb of fire, behind which only the silhouette of a boy could be seen anymore. "Protego horribilis! Protego horribilis-"

Theo's shield broke, and Theo fell to the ground, gasping. "Impedimenta!" he yelled to try and keep Draco back. Draco reflected it contemptuously, making Theo stagger back into the wall again, barely off his knees.

"Sectilis procella!" Theo yelled. Draco could have reflected back the tiny deadly shots of dark magic that flew through the air at him like small arrowheads, but he absorbed them instead. He couldn't have Theo's arm sliced up. Not before he *checked*...

"Expelliarmus," Draco cast. He said it aloud and made a show of his ease with it. He caught Theo's wand and grabbed him, dragging him up the wet, scorched wall, only to find Theo was the one laughing now. "What?" Draco demanded, the laughter making him feel somehow impotent, like Theo had *him* at his mercy. He should be the only one laughing. "What the fuck is *funny*?"

"You're a pyromancer, Grindelwald," Theo laughed unsteadily, shoulders shaking from it. "Of course. Of course on top of everything, you're a *pyromancer*..." It wasn't hard to read between the lines, what followed from that in Theo's mind. *How am I supposed to beat that*? Or maybe, more exactly, *How am I supposed to kill that?* Draco knew the feeling. He'd felt in the Fountain of Magical Brethren. This room was a fountain now too, steaming ruins and cinders, and here as in there, the talon wand would ultimately be on the side that triumphed. *I can't lose, not with this, and now I have him-*

"Manibipiscatus!" Theo's wrists slid up the wall, trapped. Theo's laugh faded, but he stared Draco in the eye, trembling and yet defiant.

Something about the way Theo could meet his gaze made him know he would not find the sight he expected, even before he grabbed Theo's sleeves and tugged them up to the elbow. Theo's outturned wrists were as untarnished as Draco's own. He ran his hands over the skin to

be sure there was no covering, cosmetic or magical, no sting of enchantment to hide anything, and there was nothing. Theo shivered at his touch, finally turning his wrecked face away.

They don't have to have given him the mark for him to be working for them, Draco reminded himself, and yet his feet still stumbled back, talon wand rattling in his hand, practically falling over something too burned to be recognizable. He didn't understand. He just *didn't*. They had given *Draco* the Dark Mark when they gave him his mission against Hogwarts and Dumbledore. It had been as much a punishment as anything, like a cattle brand given to a person- a slave brand, to ensure there would be no going back for him. But Theo's arms were no different than they had always been, all the times they wrapped around Draco as held him as they fucked, as they pressed him down somewhere and Draco begged, a lifetime ago.

"Are you going to let me go?"

Draco cast Finite incantatem with a deflated wave. Theo held out his hand for his own wand. Draco experienced a brief, mad temptation to snap it and throw it in his face. Toss it into the wreckage of the room, for all the use it would be. It would fit well, in the seething smoke of one more place Draco had ruined.

"At a distance," Draco said flatly, and Theo backed off until he was at the door of the prefect's bathroom. Once Draco levitated the wand over, he half-expected Theo to try to curse Draco, but he just ran again.

All Draco could do was sink down the wall, to sit where Theo had been sitting, or rather where he had fallen, trying in vain to be safe from Draco, and drop his wand to put his head in his hands. The talon wand let off black steam where it touched the water.

The Samhain Masquerade

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Harry did not seem so horrified at the idea of Draco's Astaroth costume once he actually saw it. His face tended more towards slack-jawed awe, the far more appropriate reaction.

Just the wings were a tour de force, custom-ordered with a wingspan of over six feet, though Draco didn't have to keep them unfurled. They were charmed to respond to his thoughts like real wings, and almost looked real, curling out from laced-up midnight blue leather. His boots were the same leather, laced up to his knees, his trousers form-fitting and darker, with a blue dragon worked across the leather over his chest in blue diamonds and sapphires, coiling all the way from his waist up to his collarbones. His mask was also midnight blue leather, just over his eyes, lined in sapphires too.

Harry seemed less impressed by the wings or snake, or even the painted-on leather and suede, than by the choker Draco wore over the initials necklace to match them, python leather with a large real teardrop emerald right at the throat. He kept reaching out and flicking at the emerald, playing with it as an excuse to touch Draco's neck.

His playfulness was at odds with his own genuinely impressive guise, with his powerful frame well-displayed in a tailored all-black Muggle suit, set off by a hooded long black robe flowing around him. What was menacing was the stag mask, covering his entire face with the horns pushing forward as if reared to stab someone, leaving room for the hood in the back. The mask was intricately carved in a realistic style, but in red and gold, with the stag's eyes made of rubies. Draco was reminded of what a rich old pureblood family the Potters actually were. You could almost forget it of a boy who had grown up in a literal cupboard.

"You look like something that comes to drag down sinners to the underworld," Draco said, and he couldn't see Harry's mouth behind the mask, but he could practically hear him smile.

"I know you well enough to take that as a compliment," Harry whispered, and pushed up the bottom of his mask to give Draco a kiss before putting it back into place. "And I wouldn't mind going to the underworld if you'd be the demon waiting." Harry made a noise when he pulled back. "Have you been drinking, Draco?"

"Apparently it's called pre-gaming," Draco said happily. "I have no idea what that means. The other sixth-year boys had all these bottles of Firewhisky. Don't worry, I can still dance."

"You're so weird when you're drunk, though," Harry laughed, and Draco smirked.

"Doesn't mean you won't still want to dance with me," he drawled, and bit Harry's ear when he complained.

"Bloody hell," Ron blurted beside them, and at first Draco thought it was from the ear-biting. A bit judgmental on his part, if understandable. Then he looked up and saw Hermione and Luna descending from the girls' dorms to the decked-out common room, the mist billowing out from the Convent Coven making them almost seem to float.

If Draco thought they had looked lovely at the Yule Ball, that was nothing compared to this, two years older and more confident. After getting bored planning their goddess costumes, and worried that dressing Luna as Artemis might send the wrong message if Neville heard about it, he'd defaulted to teasing Hermione about dressing them up as her old beloved Disney characters. To his surprise, she'd been excited by the idea. Now, Hermione was a vision in bright yellow, Luna in bright blue, with her Sleeping Beauty turquoise necklace on. Both had their hair pinned back out of their faces, long and loose down their backs, Luna's straight and Hermione's in perfect brown ringlets. Both had perfect, graceful bearing, like Draco had instructed, as they descended arm-in-arm. Draco unfurled his wings with a snap to greet them.

Luna waited until they had joined the party to activate the enchantment she had spent days crafting to perfection, to make the dress fluctuate between blue and pink at command, as in the film of Sleeping Beauty. But Ron didn't look once at Luna, even when she began changing colors.

Hermione came up on them with a flush already on her face behind the golden mask, and Draco had to step back to admire the effect of the dress, from its short puffed sleeves and fitted bodice to the layers of yellow ruffles spilling down over the skirt to the floor. He was glad they'd forgone the yellow gloves and any other meticulous historical accuracies, like petticoats or hoop skirts. Hermione looked like the girl in the animation anyway, probably not much younger now. She looked like a real princess, and Ron's jaw was on the floor. Draco was grateful to see Harry's wasn't, and begrudged him the right to compliment Hermione and Luna since, after all, Draco had stage-managed the entire show.

There was just one piece left of stagecraft to execute. Draco went over to the Convent Coven where they were playing in front of the large tower windows, moonlight brilliant behind them, and made his song request. By the time he made it back to his friends, they'd struck up a slow, dreamy, but unmistakable rendition of the 'Tale as Old as Time' song. "Hermione, that's your cue," Draco drawled, eager to get Ron and Hermione at the romantic bit before they could spoil it by actually talking. "Beauty, time to gather your beast."

Ron looked down at himself and seemed glum but unable to dispute that characterization, his shabby plain dress robes only improved by a golden mask that had been a present from Draco. Hermione didn't seem to care once Ron stepped forward to dance with her, leading her in a waltz that Draco could only stand and watch, entranced. Luna and Harry watched on either side of him. Maybe it was more like Beauty and the Pauper, but it didn't change how, foolish as Hermione might claim it to be, she was smiling radiantly, so much he could feel its brightness from across the room.

The Convent Coven had been instructed to do this song good and slow, with a lot of verses, but Ron and Hermione didn't seem to mind. They were talking, Draco could see, though too quietly to hear, but it didn't seem to be messing anything up now. Slowly, though their waltz began awkward, they found a rhythm together.

"May I have this dance?" asked the stag, and the fallen angel turned to Sleeping Beauty.

"Luna... I mean, Aurora," Draco hedged with a chuckle, and Luna turned from blue to pink.

"We never did actually work out whose date he was, did we," Luna commented mildly.

Draco looked nervously between his boyfriend and his cousin, not wanting to occasion some tug of war. But thankfully, Tony saved him the difficulty, stepping up to them in a raven costume with a great feathered cerulean cloak that Luna exclaimed over admiringly, even before Tony got the nerve to open his mouth. "Er, Luna," Tony said, looking more afraid of Draco's reaction than the prospect of rejection, "Would you like to dance?"

"I'd love to!" she said happily, and huffed when Draco caught Tony's elbow first.

"Hands where I can see them, Goldstein," Draco ordered, and Tony grinned.

"I'm a gentleman," he protested, and swept Luna off into a waltz that had her spinning and giggling right away, as her dress turned from pink to blue again, to match her new partner.

"Neville won't like that if he hears," Harry observed. "Though didn't you say once that you thought Goldstein liked Padma Patil? Do you think he's just asking Luna to dance as a favor to you, or he actually fancies her? I mean- no offense to Luna, but this *does* mean we can dance together..."

"We can't, though," Draco said, making Harry freeze, only to take his hand when Draco finished, "Not if you don't stop running your mouth and come out on the dance floor with me."

Harry was unusually full of opinions, to the point he almost seemed as nervous as Ron. Though admittedly, to a Muggle-raised boy, casually hiring a troupe of ghost nuns to play for a Halloween party in your house common room might seem rather confronting. But it fit the ambience, Samhain inspiration given reality in the preeminence of bluebell fires that Flitwick and Hermione had helped Draco place everywhere, along with concentric wreaths of blue flame. With furniture cleared out of the way and a dance floor laid down in midnight blue velvet, it *was* a fairytale. Harry let Draco spin him, that adorable laugh coming through under the formidable but beautiful face of the stag.

"Why are you nervous?" Draco whispered once the song ended, and Luna and Tony seemed inclined to continue as partners. "You're not that bad a dancer. Is it dancing together in front of everyone again, after they took pictures at Hermione's party? We're not even the only pair of boys or girls here dancing together," he added, looking over towards a pair of third-year Ravenclaw boys he didn't know, along with Lisa Turpin and Mandy Brocklehurst from their year. Whether or not those pairs were romantic in earnest, at least it made Harry and Draco

not the only ones. Maybe Harry and Draco's public example had emboldened them. And Flitwick was not the sort of professor to try to stop them.

"No," Harry said, and leaned in close, stag horns threatening to scratch Draco. He managed them, though, as he lowered his voice, and admitted just over the eerie lilting of the music, "*You* make me so nervous. Just you." Draco tilted his head to convey his skepticism even masked. Harry's soft laughter echoed under the mask. "You do *tonight*."

"Oh," Draco said smugly. He took tighter hold of Harry's shoulders, keeping a possessive grip. He couldn't see Harry's eyes behind the mask, which was charmed to see through the stag eyes only one way, but he could imagine them hungry beneath it. "You fancy the wings, do you? You were so unhappy I was going to dress up as this..."

"The wings are..." Harry inhaled sharply. "The wings are... they're something. But it's everything. And not just that you're gorgeous. You're so elegant. So confident, like *this* is the real you, not the everyday... God, sometimes I can't believe we're together. That I've been so lucky."

It was a creative construction by any account for Harry to think *himself* the lucky one. But Draco was too charmed to dispute it, Harry's hands worked around the wings to find a comfortable hold on Draco's waist, one hand playing with the side laces of the leather.

"Sometimes I wonder what I'd do if it ended. If you and I couldn't be together. If something happened, or you just didn't want me anymore. I don't know how I *could* be with anyone else."

"Nothing's going to happen," Draco whispered soothingly, "And I'm never getting sick of you, you clodpole..."

Harry's voice was a mix of conviction and unspoken anguish. "No one else is ever going to compare to you. You really are like something from another world. I like you *too* much. I don't think it's *good*, to want *anything* as much as I want you..."

"You're saying you're obsessed with me?" Draco teased. When Harry's hands moved, sliding back to cup his arse, he pressed as close to Harry as he could with the stag horns permitting, breathing in the Amortentia scent of Harry behind the metal of the mask. "Or what, addicted... you don't think I'm obsessed with you too, Harry Potter? Do you have any idea what I would do if anyone else ever *touched* you?"

He could feel Harry shiver against him. "What would you do, dragon?"

Draco smirked, breath hot against Harry's ear. "I'd show them why I'm a *fallen* angel."

They danced, song after song, until Draco tired, making him wonder if his stamina was declining without regular Quidditch, although dueling and flying lessons should help regain it. They went to sit in some of the chairs set up at the edge, watching the dancers. Ron and Hermione took a break with them for a while, but soon they were back out on the dance floor, a bright flash of yellow amidst the other darker figures.

Draco leaned his head on Harry's shoulder, and alternated between watching Ron and Hermione or Luna and Tony, and other dancers, fully contented. Harry whispered endearments, calling him *dragon* and *angel* and *beautiful* and earning ear kisses for it. His hands went to play with Draco's choker, and then the blue dragon over his torso. He didn't seem able to stop touching Draco. When Michael came by with a bottle of Muggle soft drink secretly mixed with rum inside it, offering it like some kind of sacrifice to Astaroth, Draco was happy to drink straight from the bottle. Harry declared it tasted disgusting. That just meant more for Draco.

It was when Ron and Hermione were across the room, close to the coven, that Draco thought he saw them finally kiss. *Finally!*

He wasn't sure at first, with them far away. But they did so long enough it became obvious, even from across the room. They had both taken off their masks, faces pressed together, and were kissing like their lives depended on it, dancing forgotten. Other dancers passed by, darker silhouettes, while the one spark of bright yellow stayed in place, the princess and her beast together.

Yes, those were Hermione's hands, knotted in Ron's bright red hair. If there had been a curse on Ron, Hermione would be in the process of breaking it.

"Yes," Draco hissed, "YES!" drawing out each S. He seized onto Harry's arm like he was at Highbury and had just watched Ian Wright score a header from distance. *Don't worry, Lavender Brown*. *Some of the Grindylows in the Great Lake might be looking for company*.

Harry smiled at him fondly, taking off his own mask. Draco felt sweaty, but of course Harry looked pristine, despite the larger and heavier metal. Maybe there was an enchantment, or maybe it was just hard for Draco to think Harry looked anything but perfectly desirable.

"You know, it gets annoying," Harry joked lightly, "How you always end up being right."

Benefit of being from the future. "In a land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king."

Draco was inarguably soused by the time that Harry and Ron had to leave, a midnight curfew imposed by Flitwick, who left with all the non-Ravenclaws. The party continued, despite its ranks thinned, with only a few pairs still dancing, Draco's dormmates gathering together before the fire to drink and tell stories. Draco went off to the dorm to take a brief nap, dozing off some of the booze, and rose a bit later to stumble back to his new friends, with a hazy lulled feeling like he was still wrapped in a dream. He would have joined the sixth-year boys, but Tony deserting Luna meant that a princess was in need of a prince. Draco stumbled nobly to his duty, whirling Luna around a dance floor they soon had almost to themselves, and thought he did an admirable job. That was, for someone who could barely walk in a straight line.

Then Luna was tapped on the arm, and there like magic, it was the real prince. Harry was standing there waiting to cut in. "You came back!" Luna squealed excitedly, poking at Harry's

mask. "The stag, the stag! Oh, it's alright, you can have him back, then, Prongs," she laughed, and ran over to join the sixth-years at the fire.

"Anyone who gives murder to my cousin," Draco yelled in their direction, "Gets alcohol!" Then he considered, seeing Harry falter where he had been about to pull him to dance, and realized that had not come out right. "I mean. Ah. Anyone who gives alcohol to my cousin gets murdered!"

"We'll look after her, Draco!" called Tony, not exactly a full acquiescence, but Draco still leaned his head on Harry's chest in serene contentment.

"Did you sneak back under the invisibility cloak?" he purred, and felt Harry's affirmative sigh as a vibration against his cheek. Draco had lost his mask at some point, but Harry's was still on, glinting as untarnished and perfect as the start of the night. Draco smiled and pressed a kiss to the stag's mouth, nuzzling drunkenly at the mask as Harry led him about the floor, hands on his hips very sure. One only moved to feel at his wings, and then carefully remove one of the feathers, which went into the pocket of Harry's cloak.

"You missed me, huh?" Draco purred. He felt Harry nod against his face, and his heart sped. "There's no one up in my dorm right now. You've never seen it. Want a tour?"

"Yeah," Harry said quietly, adjusting his mask, and Draco stopped kissing at it with a sigh. He grinned to himself, then took Harry by the hand and led him up the stairs towards the dorm. He laughed at the whooping sounds that Luna and the sixth-years made. She didn't have a glass in front of her of anything stronger than Butterbeer, and at least to his drunken eyes, she looked in good hands. He waved goodbye to his Sleeping Beauty as he went off with his prince.

It was hard for them to make it up the stairs, with how compelled Draco felt to stop Harry every few steps and nuzzle at his throat, the one part of him bared. "You smell so good," Draco sighed, breathing in that Amortentia scent of Quidditch and Muggle shampoo. Harry suffered his attentions for a minute, before dragging him up in the indicated direction, clearly eager to be truly alone. Draco's wings kept knocking into the walls, even after he drew them closed. He was ready to throw them off once they reached the dorm.

Harry drew him inside, looking around, and went straight over to the curtains in front of his Deathly Hallows board, pulling at the curtain curiously. "I keep it locked," Draco said in his ear. "Don't think it would do for all my roommates to know how fond I am of Grindelwald. Not as fond as I am of you, of course," he added with a laugh, as Harry grunted and stiffened.

"Here," he said, taking Harry's hand again, and led him to his bed. He opened the curtains with a wave of his wand. "One second," he said, and began fumbling at his wings, trying to remember the incantation to unseal them from his back. "You can wait in there."

He licked his lips at the sight of Harry crawling into his bed, only to wince where Harry was impeded by the books he had left in there. "Oh, shit, sorry," Draco said, and stumbled, grabbing onto the foot of the bed and then Harry's foot- his feet really were growing bigger recently- where he pressed a ridiculous drunken kiss to Harry's large boot before recovering his balance fully. "I was reading..."

Harry had picked up the books and was examining them in turn. Draco wondered with a sinking heart if he had brought Harry all the way here only for them to get into an argument. Harry couldn't be thrilled to see his choice of light bedtime reading consisted of *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate* and *Manifestos of the Great Gellert Grindelwald*, with a cute little cat-eared inscription at the front of the latter from Luna.

Harry paged through the Hecate book rather than feasting his eyes on that little cartoon. It even had the relevant portions helpfully marked by place-keeping ribbons, transfigured from Slytherin green to Ravenclaw blue. There were markers for Hostium Posticum, Naufragiam, and Cadaunuptium. Harry examined each before staring at length at the Naufragiam. No wonder, given that he had been the victim of it. Draco had to distract him *yesterday*.

"Don't worry about that," Draco purred, finally getting his wings off and tossing them aside, then climbed onto the bed beside Harry, leveling him with his sultriest stare. He tried to pull off his tunic, but it was too tight. He only ended up tearing a few laces at the top. "You'll have to take it off for me, dragonslayer... what do you think, do you like it in Ravenclaw?" He rested his head on the pillow, playing with one of the stag horns. He leaned in and gave them each a kiss showily, his lips making a soft wet sound each time they peeled off the gold. "Am I going to have to just keep kissing your mask?"

Harry sat up, the mask staring at him for a long moment. The smell of him was almost overwhelming, with a note of flowers in the scent, like he'd worn cologne for him. Draco hoped Ron had done the same for Hermione. But when Harry's hands ran over his face, leaning over him, Draco couldn't think of anyone else on Earth.

"Kiss me," Draco pleaded, poking his fingers at the mask over Harry's lips. Harry stared down at him, seeming unsure, then he leaned down and did as Draco told him, the metal of the stag sliding out of the way of his lips just before they met Draco's.

Harry's lips were warm and slick, sweaty from under the metal, tasting of rum and coke and gold. His tongue slid immediately into Draco's mouth, no Langlock to impair him now. Draco let him, let Harry's tongue lick inside, pressing a long, heated open-mouthed kiss to Draco's mouth all in one breath. Harry's hands stayed on his face, but to press the kiss there more aggressively than he usually began. Draco supposed he *had* been working him up all night.

He sighed into the kiss in return, ready for Harry to touch him, hoping Harry wouldn't think he was too drunk to mess around. He loved the feeling of Harry's lips claiming his even with most of the mask still in the way, so sure and so familiar by now, that mouth-

Familiar, yes. *Very* familiar, that kiss. But not because it was Harry Potter's.

Draco shoved the other boy back with a start, gasping. "Who- who are," he tried to say, breath failing as panic seized his entire body, skin like ants were crawling underneath it, all the nausea from too much rum coming at once as his mind whirled, trying to understand what had just happened to him. "Are you-"

He would have reached out his hand, once he could gather up the courage. But the other boy did it for him. "I've always wanted to know," the soft familiar voice said, "What that would feel like," and off came the mask.

Dark blue eyes stared at him from behind it, and Draco screamed.

Theo eyed him in return, face expressionless, before he slid the mask back into place and walked calmly out of the room.

Draco woke up terrified and hungover. If not necessarily in that order.

Reality came hurtling back mercilessly, with the lingering taste of something unrecognizable on his tongue. Theo had gotten Harry's mask somehow, if that wasn't just a copy... Harry had gotten it in the Great Hall, so Theo could have seen, but that good a replica, and the rest of the clothes... he didn't know, he couldn't think, except Harry had left the common room and seemed to come back, except it had been Theo in his clothes- if he had taken the mask, what had he done to *Harry*-

Draco got dressed as quickly as he could. He found Harry right there at breakfast at Gryffindor. He ran straight to him and flung his arms around him, pressing his face into Harry's shoulder, which was also helpful to block out some of the light. His stomach rolled in him like he was on a boat on choppy waters, but to see Harry intact was everything he needed.

"Harry," Draco breathed. "Harry, did you come back to Ravenclaw Tower last night?"

Harry frowned at him, pulling back. "No," he said, looking as handsome and undaunted as ever. "Did you want me to? You didn't say. I just went right back to Gryffindor like Flitwick told us. Ron wanted to tell me about..." His words trailed off, and he got an embarrassed smile, looking at where beside him, Hermione and Ron were both being very quiet and ignoring the other ostentatiously. Hermione was talking to Ginny and Ron to Neville, with their backs to each other. Draco hadn't even noticed. "I think they're too embarrassed to talk about it now, though..."

"Yeah," Draco said tersely. "So nothing happened to *you*?"

Harry's brow creased. "I wasn't the one who was drunk. You alright, Draco?"

"Yeah," Draco said, taking a deep breath, "Yeah, just making sure. Great party, huh? See you later." He turned and walked quickly back to Ravenclaw, where Luna was humming classical music under her breath. She was beside Tony and Michael, and they were all talking, although the boys looked rather worse for wear after how much they'd drank last night. "Hey, Tony, Luna, did you see where Harry came from, when he came back last night?"

They looked confused. "What do you mean?" Tony asked. "I didn't see him come back."

"Ooh, did he?" said Luna happily. "Scandalous!"

"You were drunk," Draco said tightly, "Don't you remember Harry came back, and I was dancing with Luna, but he took me to dance instead, and then we went up to the dorm together, and you all went ooh and hooted?"

"Is this some kind of trick question to see if I was blackout drunk?" Michael said skeptically. "Nothing happened between any of us and your cousin, Draco! I swear! We didn't even let her drink!"

"You were sober, Luna," Draco pleaded. "Don't you remember?"

Luna frowned. "Harry left and you went up on your own, Draco. And Michael went up and made sure you were sleeping on your side. None of us saw Harry after that."

"Aw, did you have a dream of your boyfriend?" Michael cooed, then smirked. "Must have been a happy dream, if we were all hooting over you two going to the dorm together..."

Draco glanced reflexively over at Slytherin. Theo was there, seated between the other sixth-years as always. He was within earshot, but he seemed to be listening to Millie and Pansy, not the Ravenclaws. There was nothing different about him.

"Yeah," Draco said, forcing a laugh. "Yeah, how drunk was I? It must have been a dream."

More like a nightmare. Draco just hoped it hadn't been some kind of vision. Had there been absinthe in something he drank? Or was it getting worse, him seeing and hearing things that weren't there? He took out the talon wand under the table, and laid it over his thighs, stroking its bend. It seemed to purr reassuringly against his fingertips.

"Stop doing this to me," Draco whispered to it. "Stop it. I might just choose to be a Squib after all."

It might have been his imagination too, but just for a moment, the wand seemed to flare hot against his fingers, before going back to normal.

Even knowing it had been a nightmare, Draco found himself down and distracted for the next few days. He was jumpy when Harry touched him, especially without warning. But at least he was having a better time of it than Neville, whom the news of Luna hitting it off at the party with Tony seemed to have hit like the Hogwarts Express turned runaway train. He would stare moonily after her almost all the time now, and more frequently if Tony was in their vicinity. He probably wasn't up to taking on any giant snakes yet, but if you put the Sword of Gryffindor in his hand, Neville seemed up for testing it out on a certain increasingly friendly Ravenclaw.

Draco's fixation on the nightmare faded in time, as did his prickliness about being touched. Especially once he made it his mission to spend as much time around Harry as possible. He started watching all of Gryffindor's Quidditch practices. He would sit and study or research, glancing up- at random times, not at all when he heard Harry speaking, to admire the spectacle of him barking orders at people in Quidditch robes.

It was a good time, but it did come with a new set of worries, all of them of the male ginger variety. Draco's scheduled viewing pleasure was seriously undermined by Ron's tendency to have his own regularly scheduled mental breakdowns. Ron's nerves continued to assault him,

and render him a mess during practices. He even made their new Chaser Robbins cry. It was a pity Draco hadn't stuck to his guns at making Ladykiller Ron's nickname.

He knew from the rumor mill in the blue loop that Ron kissed Lavender Brown at the victory party for Gryffindor. He'd overheard Pansy and Tracey whispering about it, even as distracting as he'd been with more important pursuits. The vanishing cabinet had seemed so much more important over Quidditch that he hadn't even attended, let alone put himself in a position to play. But now his concerns rested around Ron- at first, whether he was about to lose whatever he had going with the brightest witch or wizard of their generation in favor of the *bad* kind of Amortentia-soused octopus. Then it was just whether he was about to scar himself for life against Slytherin. He couldn't save a *thing*. At least in practice, that was. When it was just Ron and Draco, Ron was an excellent Keeper.

"You have to beat Slytherin," Draco hissed in Ron's ear as they dismounted their brooms, at the end of their last night flight before the Gryffindor-Slytherin match. "You *have* to. These pricks on that team, Montague and them, they're the ones who abandoned me and the others last year- you remember that? Just because I wanted girls on the team? And now they didn't let any girls try out-"

"I know, I know," Ron said, holding his hands up. "I did fine tonight, didn't I?"

"Because you don't have nerves, when it's just us," Draco said impatiently. It also had to help that Draco was a singularly poor Chaser, and they both knew it. "Compared to practice earlier tonight... if you needed any more proof that it's your nerves that trip you up, not your skill... I'll give you some calming draughts, that should help, but if you don't have confidence-"

"I'm just no good at Keeper," Ron said sadly, and proved unshakable in that belief. Nor was he willing to stop putting off addressing what happened with Hermione until he had gotten the match over with. And Draco doubted he'd be in much of a mood for love after the massacre that seemed liable to ensue.

At least until the next morning, when Harry came to the Ravenclaw common room with a surprising request. "I need the Felix Felicis you won from Slughorn," he whispered, drawing Draco to a corner and looking around nervously, while Luna pretended not to follow and eavesdrop.

"You can have it, sure. But this had better be unrelated to your match today," Draco said skeptically. "Otherwise, you could be expelled for real, famous Harry Potter and all-"

"Listen," Harry said intently, and by the time he was done explaining his plan, Luna had given up any pretense of not listening.

"Oh, I think it's brilliant," Luna said cheerily. "Only we'll have to survive Hermione's wrath if she doesn't know you're just *pretending* to give it to him."

"We can't tell her," Harry said stubbornly. "I'm going to pretend to put it in his drink- he'll see the real Felix Felicis, it just won't go in- and she will too. Her reaction will sell it, Ron won't believe I've done it otherwise. You can tell Hermione once Ron is off thinking he's invincible."

"Harry," Draco said admiringly, "You have more of a devious streak than I gave you credit for, don't you?" He stroked his fingers over Harry's forearm, eyeing him up, and Luna smiled wider.

"Are the two of you going to snog?" she asked politely. "Don't let me stop you."

"We aren't *now*, you've ruined the mood," Draco groused, and they went down to breakfast.

From Hermione's face as she went to join them in the Gryffindor stands, it seemed Harry had successfully made her think he'd dosed Ron. She still seemed disapproving even after they explained it, seeming to feel it a bit wrong even relying on what she called 'the placebo effect'.

"Would you rather watch Ron crash and burn?" Luna asked brightly. "I'd rather not. It would be rather embarrassing otherwise, this hat."

No one but Luna would have thought this hat wasn't embarrassing regardless, especially as they were naturally joined by her ex-boyfriend Neville- what a strange for a Neville Longbottom to be, *someone's ex-boyfriend*. Tony was off in the Ravenclaw section, since, after all, there was nothing actually going on between him and Luna more than a developing friendship. Tony had turned out to be a fan of the Quibbler, and interested in journalism. Not to mention he really did fancy Padma Patil. Luna was helping counsel him about making a move on her. Relying on Luna for love advice was a life choice that seemed liable to backfire in the best of scenarios, but hey, his funeral. And best let Neville nourish his unwarranted jealousy, if it pushed him to fight for her.

Though he might prefer doing so with the Sword of Gryffindor sooner than *romance.*

Luna did not look the heroine of a scandalous love triangle. With their Gryffindor support unequivocal, her Rapunzel-long hair was covered by a massive lion head, adorable little face poking out from the roaring mouth. Draco had confined himself to a burgundy red jumper and Gryffindor scarf. Even those felt like he was a hideous imposter and also, he had to admit in his soul, a traitor. It was a relief not to spot Theo's sandy blond head in the Slytherin stands, at least until he remembered what *he'd* been up to in the blue loop during this match.

"I like your hat, Luna," Neville said tentatively, and she smiled at him reservedly. When the Gryffindor team emerged, though, her hat gave out a proud, throaty, unrestrained roar.

Draco could cheer as well, he discovered, though it gave him the strangest sense of unreality, perched in the red and gold end of the stands rooting for Gryffindor with the rest of them, wearing Harry's initials as always around his neck. He only pushed away his sense of unbelonging when Harry approached closer to view. He shamelessly borrowed Hermione's Omnioculars to follow Harry's movements as he led Gryffindor out. Then the surrealness was all from the knowledge that this was his boyfriend and the whole world knew it. *Harry fucking Potter*, he thought, almost dazed by the wonder of it. *He's actually mine.*

"Draco!" Neville was shaking his shoulder. "Draco! Wave back!" It seemed he wanted at least one Gryffindor not to be unlucky in love.

Draco found he'd missed Harry waving up at them. Hermione elbowed him, and Draco waved back. He gave Hermione her Omnioculars and watched Harry with his own eyes approach the Slytherin captain. Montague had failed last year and remained, whereas Draco remembered Urquhart as captain in the blue loop, but it didn't matter. Harry and Ron should still slaughter them. With Millie not even eligible, Ron should be the stronger Keeper by far. Not to mention the advantage Gryffindor had at Seeker...

Zacharias Smith was so irritating as a commentator, Draco wished he'd never taken the Verniculpa off those hands so smugly holding the microphone. But it hardly mattered, as they watched Ron execute fingertip save after save, while Ginny walloped Slytherin's substandard male Keeper at the other end.

"See?" Draco whispered in Hermione's ear. She *was* being rather hypocritical condemning their Felix Felicis trick, given how she'd Confunded McLaggen at tryouts that very year. "He's like a different person, isn't he? He's incredible. See what Ron's capable of when he believes in himself?"

"He's amazing," Hermione breathed, looking to be remembering their dance and kiss at the masquerade, more than reflecting on Quidditch. When Ron saved yet another shot, this time with his feet, her cheer as she leapt to her feet was so loud it nearly burst Draco's eardrums.

"And I think Harper of Slytherin's seen the Snitch!" Smith declared at one point, nearly giving Draco a heart attack. "Yes, he's certainly seen something Potter hasn't!"

Draco's heart stayed in his mouth, as he watched them both soaring high after the spark of gold. He wanted his boyfriend to win, and besides, his pride could not stand it if another Slytherin Seeker did in a match what Draco had never done fairly, and actually beat Harry to the Snitch.

And he didn't want Slytherin to be able to win without Millie, for her sake. Or without Pansy. Or Astoria. Whatever Draco had done- whatever he had done to *Theo*- it shouldn't just be Vince and Greg out there as the sole remainder of the Kingsnakes. The girls should have been there.

Harper didn't get the Snitch, though. Harry was faster. He was always faster, and for the first time in Draco's two lives, he could cheer with his whole heart as the Snitch once again was caught up in Harry's hand as securely as Draco's heart.

Everyone was on their feet in the stands, the impact of feet stomping of it like a great stampede. Draco was one with the crowd, with Luna's lion roaring the loudest. She and Neville hugged fiercely, only to pull back quickly, abashed. Not in time, though, to keep Luna's lion hat from giving Neville's face a speculative lick.

All the Gryffindors engaged in a spontaneous midair hug, except for Ginny. As much as she made Draco nervous at the best of times, when in the same country mile as Harry, it was worth any price of admission to watch her plow her broom straight into the commentary stand, wrecking the lot and sending Zacharias Smith crumpling in a daze.

"GINEVRA WEASLEY!" McGonagall yelled, as the stands howled in laughter.

"Forgot to brake, Professor, sorry!" Ginny called cheekily for all to hear, and Draco joined his friends in cheering her. At least until she came over to Gryffindor and hugged Harry. Draco began to mentally inventory every dark curse he knew, in the mere seconds before she let go.

He had to have a word with Ron, though, for fear of what would happen at the celebration party, in a common room from which he remained annoyingly banned. But he was not banned from the Gryffindor dressing room. Once he saw everyone but Ron and Harry file out, he busted his nonchalant way in, ignoring Katie Bell's scandalized double-take. *I'm not here to get my boyfriend off, prude. Just to keep my ladykiller friend from getting off with the wrong lady.*

"Draco!" Harry exclaimed, only to deflate when his boyfriend made straight for Ron instead of him. Both were still on the benches in their Quidditch robes. Harry did make a truly mouthwatering sight, but Draco had business to attend to first.

"You were right, I did it, I did it, wasn't I marvelous," Ron babbled up at Draco, and Draco smirked over at Harry.

"Wanna show him, captain?" Draco drawled. Harry's green eyes went bright again at another ill-considered nickname.

"I didn't really spike your drink, Ron," Harry said, grinning broadly. "I didn't put it in. Look." He showed Ron the bottle, still full to the brim with gold, wax over the cork still unbroken in its seal. "I wanted you to think I'd done it, so I faked it when I knew you were looking. *You* saved everything, because you *felt* lucky. You did it all yourself. Here, Draco, have it back."

"No, keep it," Draco said, putting it in Harry's bag. He turned the attention back to Ron before Harry could question that unusual bit of charity. "So, Cannon, looks like you're just a class Keeper!"

"There really wasn't anything in my pumpkin juice?" Ron breathed, sounding absolutely gobsmacked, and it was impossible not to smile. "But the weather's good... and Vaisey couldn't play... I honestly haven't been given lucky potion?" Then his joy faded slightly. "But Hermione thinks I was, you know, she was so cross with us..."

"I told her what we'd done as soon as you lot were off," Draco reassured him. "Luna and Neville heard too. We *all* knew it was you saving those shots, Ron. Just you and those worn-out old gloves." Draco knew something he was getting Ron for Christmas.

Ron grinned wider. "Bloody hell, let's get a move on, then! I can't wait for the party!"

"Speaking of parties," Draco said sharply, "Don't forget you're attending one at Christmas, with *Hermione*. I don't care that you're a bigtime sports star now and the girls will be all over you. If you so much as *look* at another girl funny at that party, let alone *kiss* one-"

"Hermione hasn't talked to me once since Halloween," Ron said glumly.

"Ronald Weasley," Draco said, taking both shoulders firmly, "You kissed her. She kissed you. I don't care if the two of you have been too chicken to talk about it. If you're going to try and

kiss someone, kiss *her*. I suggest you make the experiment. And don't let anyone else snog *you*, either. If you kiss another girl, Cannon, I will curse that mouth that kissed her off your face, do you hear me?" Ron touched his face and Draco rolled his eyes. "You honestly don't think I know how? It's called Oscausi. You want a demonstration?"

"Okay," Ron said hastily. "D'you really think Hermione might want to kiss me again?"

"If you tell her the truth," Draco said bluntly, "That you fancy her like mad."

Harry's eyebrows shot up, while Ron began to change as quickly as he could. "I don't- I don't fancy Striker," he mumbled, sounding so unconvincing that even Harry seemed to hear the effective admission it had become.

"Ron!" Harry exclaimed. "*Hermione*?"

"Shut up, you lovelorn sod," Ron muttered, pulled on his clothes, and raced out of the dressing room.

"Well," Draco said with satisfaction, "That should be them sorted. And it wasn't an empty threat. You won't dump me if I leave your best mate mouthless, will you, Harry?"

"I'll never dump you," Harry said. With Ron gone, he seemed to feel comfortable letting his appreciation of Draco in Gryffindor colors show. "Look at you. I can't believe you're wearing a Gryffindor scarf." If Draco had been successful with the Sorting Hat, Harry would have seen Draco in a Gryffindor tie every day, but this seemed to do. "You *were* rooting me on, weren't you?"

"Wholeheartedly," Draco agreed, "Although you were almost bested by that other Seeker- mmm. *Mmm*." He wrapped his arms around Harry's neck, leaning over to return the kiss, as Harry's hands came up and slid right under Draco's jumper. "But you... you did win. Merlin, you're so predictable," he sighed inanely, as Harry pulled him onto his lap without further delay, hands going to Draco's waist. He didn't even bother to put up a token show of resistance as he straddled Harry's thighs. "Aren't you anxious to get to the celebration, captain?"

Harry's laugh was a low vibration against his lips, hands hot and sweaty under his jumper. All of Harry's warmth seemed to suffuse Draco, and some of the adrenaline from the match with it. "Call me captain again."

"Is this a fantasy of yours," Draco laughed, taking off Harry's glasses for better access. "Having me come congratulate you personally?" Harry had hardly ever looked happier. "For how long?"

"You don't even want to know," Harry grinned, and tugged at the ends of Draco's Gryffindor scarf. He made a protesting noise when Draco took it off. "I imagined you giving me another rose, for one..."

"Oh, is *that* what you fantasize about," Draco teased, and pecked Harry's mouth a last time before sliding off his lap. Right to the ground, at Harry's feet. "A flower? Or a different

reward?" Harry's fingers reached out to trail through Draco's hair, and Draco turned his face up to kiss them eagerly. He traced over Draco's lips, and Draco could have died of how good it felt, to get on his knees and see Harry Potter looking down at him. He'd put his glasses back on, like he wanted to see as much of Draco as he could.

"What did you have in mind?" Harry breathed.

Draco leaned forward and kissed Harry's thigh, nuzzling at the fabric. Harry inhaled sharply, fingers combing through Draco's hair again. Draco looked up, meeting his gaze again, before lowering his face to show Harry exactly how it *felt* to slay a dragon.

His hands went to feel at Harry's back again as he did, at the number 7 and the Potter name. It was Harry, he had to double-check. Harry Potter and no one else.

Harry was his. *Mine,* was what kept going through Draco's head. *Mine, mine, mine.*

No one is ever going to touch him but me, he thought with satisfaction.

And with more of a chill:

And no one but him is ever going to touch me either.

Gilderoy Lockhart

Chapter Notes

Playlist

FUGITIVE FRAUD LOCKHART FOUND!

Early yesterday morning, the Ministry of Magic received a shock communication from the secretive Associació Autònoma de Mags Catalans in Barcelona, Spain. Quoth the AAMC: *We have your fallen hero on the run, and we're ready to turn him over to your custody*!

Barcelona has been rocked in recent months by the disappearance of many of its magical citizens without explanation. The mystery was solved with the discovery of Castell de L'Infern, long thought destroyed, an ancient medieval castle that was the stronghold of the infamous Vampir Senyor Seguinis Sade de L'Inframon. Seguinus preached the superiority of vampires over wizards, and advocated for the enslavement of all humankind. Seguinus had been thought dead three centuries ago, but he was slain in combat by the famed Bruixots de Sang of Barcelona, the feared BDS, not three days ago. The sole human companion to Seguinus's band of bloodthirsty monsters? None other than the missing Gilderoy Lockhart, unmasked as an imposter by the wounded wizarding world, while he absconded into the Spanish Pyrenees with murderous monsters.

Nestled between two black glacial lakes as a natural moat, atop the Pic de L'Infern, or "Hell's Peak", Castell de L'Infern has been home to some of the worst depravities known to humanity. Using the mountain monastery Montserrat as their launching point, the followers of Seguinus Sade kidnapped citizens of Barcelona and spirited them away to their dread lair in the comarca of Ripollès. Humans were kept alive as blood slaves and as sacrifices for shadowy, sinister blood rituals.

These atrocities culminated in the kidnapping of an entire class of young witches of seven and eight, from the all-girls' wizarding Catholic school of Cor Sagrat de la Santa Verge. Taken from their field trip to Montserrat monastery, the twenty-five girls of Cor Sagrat disappeared for over a month, and their parents despaired. But they were all rescued alive last week, along with Mr. Lockhart, said to be found in a state just as near death as the anemic children.

The nature of the association of Lockhart with these so-called Socis de Seguinus has yet to be unveiled. He was taken for top-secret treatment at St. Mungo's before he could be interrogated by the Ministry of Magic.

Mr. Lockhart was once believed a great battler of dark creatures, but after his cowardly flight from Hogwarts, intrepid reporters unmasked Mr. Lockhart as an imposter who stole the deeds and their memories of greater men for his own enrichment. Now he has been returned to Britain from as terrible a setting of danger and darkness as ever embellished in his fraudulent fairytales. But was he prey or predator?

The wizarding world waits with bated breath to hear the truth about their once golden boy, brought to reckoning at last.

"Oh, it's a shame," was Luna's immediate response. "I did enjoy his dueling club."

"Holy shit," was all Draco's formidable vocabulary could muster. "Holy fucking shit."

Luna repeated his words, examining his Daily Prophet, and Tony laughed.

"You're corrupting your cousin, Draco," he jibed. "Say, what do you make of this?"

"Corrupting her? That ship has long sailed with Cousin," Draco said distractedly. "But Lockhart... what are they on about, asking if he was predator or prey? Lockhart would be the natural prey in a room with a Niffler. The man with the Midas touch..."

"He'll end up at Azkaban, don't you think?" Tony asked casually.

Draco's chest constricted like it always did at the reminder of that singularly unholy place, even if the Dementors were missing. The smell of the Dementors would still be in the stone...

"No one deserves Azkaban," Draco said tightly.

To think he'd thought he *saved* Lockhart, avoiding the circumstances of his Obliviation in second year. Even disregarding what must have been years of hell with some sadistic cult, anyone who wouldn't prefer a wiped mind to life in Azkaban didn't understand a thing.

"Not even our Aunt Bella?" Luna asked knowingly, and Draco gave her a Severus eye-roll.

"No, Aunt Bella deserves *death*," he said, "*Obviously*," and Tony quickly turned back to conversing with Michael and Terry instead.

The next day's Prophet had little new information. But the long article that came out the day after that was such a twist on the first two, it had everyone at all four tables talking of nothing else, wondering to each other whether it could be true. If it wasn't, Gilderoy Lockhart somehow retained one hell of a press team. Draco should look into acquiring them.

GILDEROY LOCKHART SAVED MY DAUGHTER FROM BLOOD SACRIFICE!

SPANISH FAMILIES SPEAK OUT IN PRAISE OF UNLIKELY HERO

The investigation of the Spanish Bruixots de Sang has uncovered a shocking twist in the saga of Gilderoy Lockhart: Mr. Lockhart is the *savior* of the twenty-five schoolgirls kidnapped by the vampire coven! All of the Socis of Seguinus were slain along with the ringleader himself, during the attack of the Bruixots de Sang on the Castell de L'Infern. But the BDS have interviewed the kidnapped girls, and based upon their report, the AAMC has issued a formal commendation to Mr. Lockhart.

"Gilderoy was just as much a prisoner as we were," says the brave young Maria Alba, seven, speaking exclusively to the Daily Prophet from a hospital in Barcelona. Her mother cradles her in her arms while her daughter speaks of her month of torment. Her father, Minister Manel Alba, forty-one and broad-shouldered with salt-and-pepper hair and quiet strength in his demeanor, leads Catalunya's magical government. Today, he watches protectively by his wife and daughter's side.

"When we arrived in the castle," Maria Alba explains, "They told Gilderoy to look after us until they needed our blood. They hit him when he asked why they brought children. He had fang marks on his arms, and he seemed terrified, so I didn't think he could help us. But he found a way."

Miss Alba, who is her year's top student and class president, struggles not to cry. Still, she keeps her composure as she speaks. "Gilderoy would go to the vampire lord to ask him for food for us, and he would beat him just for asking. It happened so many times. But he always tried to keep us well-fed and comfortable, until we were supposed to be bled to death in the dungeons of the castle. Seguinus made his followers march us all there the night before, to show us the room. We had to wait there while they made Gilderoy hang up the chains to show us where they would kill us all in their ritual."

Her classmate from the next hospital room, Paula Comas, stops in to visit her friend and confirm the story, as have all of their class. A slight and fair-haired girl of eight, Miss Comas looks near collapse. Though even speaking is an effort after her ordeal, she is insistent the real story must be told. "The vampires just kept Gilderoy alive to help rebuild the castle. They used him as a slave for his blood, and for the spells he could do to move the stone and animate the statues. But Gilderoy told us that he had been using the castle-building spells for himself, to secretly make a way out. He'd been looking for a way to escape for years, and at midnight, the night before were to be killed, he took us all out of the castle by a secret passage he had made, a tunnel under the glacier lake."

Miss Alba holds hands with her friend as they speak of their ordeal. "It came out in the middle, and we all had to swim. It was very cold. Paula and our friend Núria nearly drowned, and Gilderoy swam them on his back to the shore. Then he cast spells to warm us all. It took us days to make it down to the town of Lleida. We were all so exhausted we could barely walk. Sometimes we had to carry each other down the steep bluffs. The vampires were on our trail the whole time, but when one caught us, Gilderoy used the Obliviate spell and stole the memory of finding us."

Miss Comas pleads for clemency for her hero. "We didn't know anything about him until we came home. We just knew him as Gilderoy. He would give us his own food and go hungry. Now they tell us he's a terrible criminal back in England. But he saved all of our lives, and that's why he's been captured. I hope they don't do anything bad to him. I want the chance to thank him someday."

"He's the only reason my daughter is alive," says Mrs. Sofia Alba, the wife of the Catalan minister, and devoted mother of Miss Alba. An attractive woman of thirty-seven with long dark hair, Mrs. Alba's large black eyes brim with tears as she pleads eloquently for mercy in her native tongue. "I can never thank him enough for the miracle he accomplished bringing our Maria back."

The Catalan ministry, the AAMC, is an autonomous government allied to the larger Ministerio de Magia of Spain. Mrs. Alba's husband, Minister Alba, says he has appealed to Castilia for intercession with Minister Scrimgeour. Spanish Minister of Magic Juan Correa confirms that t has spoken privately with Minister Scrimgeour about Mr. Lockhart's extraordinary case, and offers his country's gratitude to Britain's once-disgraced pariah. However, the Daily Prophet can exclusively reveal that the Ministry will accept no mitigation of Mr. Lockhart's crimes with stories of unlikely heroism. They intend to bring him publicly to trial as soon as his health permits him to leave his hospital bed.

Draco proved unusually quiet during his Friday night flight with Ron. The November chill had little effect on him, so distant was his mind. It was with ease that Ron could parry Draco's shots at the hoops. Finally, Ron called an end to their flying, and signaled to land.

"What's wrong with you, mate? You wanna just cut it short tonight?"

"Have you been following all the shit about Lockhart?"

"Everyone has," Ron said, sitting on the ground with a grin. "It's bloody brilliant. I always said the old blowhard was a fraud."

"Says the person who wanted to take him with us to the Chamber of Secrets." If Draco had allowed it, Lockhart would likely have somehow been Obliviated as in the blue loop. It was hard not to take such changes as his personal responsibility, even his own sins, though the butterfly effect had them spiraling wider than he could predict. But Lockhart had been someone he *decided* to help.

What was the saying? Save someone's life, and you're bound to them for the rest of *your* life?

"Whatever," Ron said, and went off on a tangent that might retrospectively explain his glee at Lockhart's downfall. "Hermione was snowed by him. She had such a crush. Do you know if she has a crush on anyone else? She isn't still interested in Viktor Krum, is she?"

"She's not into anyone but you," Draco said. He should have seized the chance to talk up their budding relationship, but found his guilt too strong to think of anything else. "And your love life is not what I'm worried about right now."

"You're worried about Lockhart?" Ron naturally attributed a less altruistic motive to his concern. "You think something will come out in his trial that you don't want known?" he asked conspiratorially.

If anyone of his friends would understand how the wizarding world worked, how the *Ministry* worked, it would be Ron. "I'm going to level with you. I want to save Lockhart."

Ron started to laugh, then stopped once he realized Draco was serious. "What the hell? Don't tell me you fancied him too."

Draco gave a long eye-roll. "One, I've only ever really fancied Harry, and two, ew. No, I just don't want to see him go to Azkaban."

"Can you imagine?" Ron said with relish. "Don't think they'd let him hang signed pictures of himself *there*... hey, don't make that face, it's not like there's Dementors there anymore anyway."

"I tried to ask Severus about getting Dumbledore and the Order to intervene for him. But he laughed me out of his office. I wrote to Remus and Sirius, but they haven't written back yet..."

"Cor, you're serious about this? Why?"

"I think he could be useful to the Order," Draco lied.

"*How*?"

"I don't know." Draco pulled his knees to his chest, staring out at the night. "I just want to save him."

Ron snorted. "And you say *Harry's* got a savior complex. But seriously, *Lockhart*?"

Draco knew the real reason why Lockhart's fate disturbed him. It wasn't some new moral sense, not really. It was the reason he had helped Lockhart in the first place.

"Okay, Ron," Draco said, testing the waters. "I'm going to trust you with something I've never discussed with anyone, even the people it involves. If you tell a single soul, intentionally or not, I'll cast Langlock on you every morning for at least a week. Maybe a month. Depends on my mood at the time. Maybe Oscausi instead! And then it's Verniculpa *after* that-"

Ron raised his hands hastily. "Okay, okay, I get it. I've been sufficiently menaced! So?"

"I want Lockhart around because he could protect my godfather. Severus needs protection-"

"Did you miss the duel in second year, mate? Should be hard for *you* to forget. You did kind of cause a riot. Snape laid out Lockhart on his arse, like, *historically.* Don't think he needs protecting by Lockhart of all people."

"He needs all the protection he can get," Draco snapped, chest uncomfortably tight. "But I'm the only person anywhere *near* the Order who even gives a *shit* about him."

"I wonder why," Ron laughed, only to shrink back. "Sorry, sorry, it's just not like he goes out of his way to, like, make friends and influence people, you know?"

As usual, Ron spoke with Occam's razor, the voice of blunt reason. He was right that if no one cared for Severus, it was to some degree Severus's fault. But Severus couldn't change what life had made him- what it had cut him *down* to, honed dark and sharp and cruel.

"He does *more* than that. He has the hardest, most thankless, *dangerous* job as a spy. I begged him to stop, but he wouldn't..."

"I remember how it felt," Ron said quietly. "When my dad got hurt working for the Order. I don't want that to happen to you, Frankenstein."

"It could be like that," Draco said heavily, "Or it could be worse. But he's not going to stop being a spy, and he *will* get killed for it, Cannon, I'm certain of it. And everyone in the Order just takes him for granted, even Dumbledore. They don't appreciate the risks he takes, they don't respect him, and they aren't about to go out of their way for him. If he dies, that's an *acceptable loss.* But not for me. Whatever the rest of the world thinks of him, *I* love him. And I'll fight for him. I'll die for him if that's what it takes. I swear it. In the name of Hecate, I swear it."

Ron was silent, then took Draco's hand, as the misery of war swept over them both.

"I'm sorry. I don't want anything to happen to him. Not just for your sake. He's on our side, and spying is a huge risk. Can't imagine trying to keep all those lies straight. I'm with you about Snape, okay? But what the bloody hell has that to do with Lockhart?"

"Here's the part you can't tell. Lockhart is in love with Severus."

"What?" Ron screeched, so loudly it was a good thing they were alone, outside, at night. "What? What? What what? Love? Like *gay sex* love?"

A porcine sort of snort escaped Draco's nose involuntarily. It took some of the weight off his chest. "Yes, Cannon, like gay sex love. I have a more than passing familiarity with the concept."

"Your godfather was having it off with Lockhart? I think I'm going to spew."

"No, Severus would never! He never even knew Lockhart liked him! Lockhart was a *secret* admirer!" Ron made a face at the childish appellation, but there was no better way to explain it. "He sent Severus all these letters and presents back in second year, after the dueling club. He started interrogating me about him around then, and I figured out it was him. But Severus never realized, and Lockhart never had the nerve to declare his feelings-"

Ron nodded at that. "Guess he had a bit more sense than we gave him credit for."

"That's my godfather you're talking about," Draco said tightly.

"I don't mean because your godfather isn't, er, um, a catch. I just think it's kind of like a bunny rabbit trying to mate with a shark. Not likely to end in much other than disaster for the

rabbit."

Draco mentally stored that image. Not inaccurate. "You're a poet, Cannon. There's a line by a Muggle poet like that. 'The deer that would be mated by the lion has to die for love'." Draco thought himself charitable not applying that analogy to Ron and Hermione. *Beauty and the Beast, and the lion and the deer.* But best not to deflate Ron's confidence there any more than necessary.

"No wonder Lockhart was scared," Ron shuddered. "Are you sure it was him?"

"He asked Severus to meet him the night of Valentine's Day, and said he'd wait all night if necessary. Severus didn't come, of course. Lockhart was exhausted and sad all the next day. I didn't see him offer anyone an autograph once. After that, he just kind of skulked around Severus, forlornly bragging about his fake adventures."

By the time Draco finished, Ron was holding onto his stomach, trying not to laugh right from his diaphragm. "Bloody hell," Ron gasped. "This is the best thing I've ever heard."

"You can't tell anybody," Draco warned.

"But I *want* to," Ron whined. "It's too cruel! You're gonna tell me something this beautiful and not let at least me tell Fred and George? It would make their *lives*!" Draco had to concede that the twins would have a field day with this information, which was the problem. "It's the funniest shit I've ever heard. Talk about an odd couple. I want to tell everyone I've ever met! I want to hire Luna to write a ballad about them-"

Draco enjoyed anyone appreciating Luna's objectively superlative poetic abilities, but they were getting off topic again. "Do you want details or what?"

"You're sure it was romantic?"

"Oh, yeah. In the letter on Valentine's Day, when Lockhart asked to meet, he offered him to help keep him warm on cold nights in the dungeons."

"BAH!" Ron had to clutch his stomach so hard, he ended up hunching over. "Cold nights in the *dungeons*..."

Draco tried hard not to let the corners of his lips turn up. It all *was* rather absurd in retrospect. "He'd also filled Severus's chambers to brimming with golden roses."

"*No*!"

"He'd given him a tapestry for Christmas. A pretty meadow full of golden roses. Gold as in gilded for Gilderoy, I suppose."

"Stop it," Ron wheezed, tears escaping from the corners of his eyes. "Have mercy, my stomach hurts so bad, I'm gonna die. You're making this up! I swear this is too good to be true."

"I'm not."

Skepticism produced one objection. "I never saw that tapestry."

Draco had feared a dismal fate for his own presents to Severus, but only Lockhart's had suffered one. "The minute he unwrapped it and saw it, he threw it into his fireplace."

"Ha!" Ron snorted like a pig too.

"I almost felt bad for Lockhart!" Draco feigned sentimentality before delivering the kicker: "He told me once that he wanted to bring light to Severus's lonely life."

"Bloody hell, that's wicked," Ron cackled. "But does your godfather even *like* men?"

"As if I'm going to tell you anything about *Severus's* private life. And it doesn't matter. Anyone on Earth would have a better chance with Severus than *Lockhart*. I'm not trying to play matchmaker. I just want someone else around who'll *want* to protect Severus."

Ron wiped moisture from his eyes. "But Lockhart is useless, mate."

"He has to have picked up something from all those vampires!" Draco almost found himself convincing. "The account sounds harrowing. The crucible of suffering is what makes you strong, right?"

Ron squinted doubtfully. "I'm pretty sure that's just you, Frankenstein. Most stones don't turn into diamond under pressure. They just crumble."

"I wish you were, like, *ever* this clever and poetic around Hermione. She'd be so impressed."

Ron's cheeks went ruddier. "Whatever. I guess you or the others could train Lockhart up some. At worst, he could be a human body shield. You really think he'll still be carrying a torch-"

"I bet he will," Draco said, meditating on similarities even in name between Severus Snape and Seguinus Sade. "Have you *seen* pictures of that vampire? Lockhart's got a *type*."

"Urrrrgh. I guess that makes sense..."

"Maybe. Or just... I don't know. Maybe he thought Severus was the real thing, you know? What he'd been pretending to be. Someone with all the strength and toughness and experience with darkness that Lockhart pretended to have. Just without all the glamour and gold and show of it. Severus is the *actual* hero people should be writing books about."

"When you talk about Snape like that," Ron mused. "I can almost see why you're so fond of him. Then I actually have to be in a room with him for five minutes, and I'm like nope, still a dick."

"What am I gonna *do*, Ron?"

"The castle thing, right?" Ron said casually, and Draco just blinked. "It's so obvious. I just assumed it's what you already had in mind. You mean *how* are you going to convince the Order it would be worth interfering, to get Lockhart's help with your uncle's castle?" Draco

was met with the unfamiliar sensation of Ron making *him* feel like a blockhead. "That *was* your idea, right? You read the articles. He was helping with rebuilding their creepy vampire sex murder den. And Sirius and Remus are rebuilding the citadel. Have the Ministry turn him over to Dumbledore's custody, and serve his confinement on the Isle of Xaphan, instead of the island of Azkaban. Easy as."

"Ronald Weasley," Draco said reverently. "I could kiss you right now, if my boyfriend wouldn't smother you in your sleep for it."

"Yeah, think I'll pass, mate."

"See, this is why I asked you for advice," Draco said, clasping Ron on the shoulder. "You have more common sense than the rest of us put together. Including me."

"Aw, come off it," Ron said embarrassedly, looking unused to such praise. "It's such an obvious idea-"

"Then why didn't *I* think of it?" Draco chose to attribute that to Ron's cleverness rather than his own ineptitude. "*And* you're the one who figured out a plan for the Department of Mysteries last summer. And of course, the supreme death blow to the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets that was the *counterfeit rooster calls*. Not just a master of strategy in chess but at life, the inimitable Sir Ronald, best and brightest of the Weasleys..."

"That's right," Ron said proudly. "That's why on your official Weasley children ranking, I'm number one."

Over the years in the red line, Draco had gotten into the habit of complaining that no one listened to him. But with this suggestion, the opposite seemed true, even with the first and most surly of hurdles. He went to Severus's chambers for their normal check-in and immediately began to barrage him with Ron's plot, which he had the sense to present as his own. Severus seemed to find the prospect of Lockhart's usefulness about as plausible as Voldemort giving up his life of crime and opening an upmarket patisserie, but he heard his godson out, at least.

Draco's case was aided by the Sunday issue of the Prophet, open on Severus's table. Lockhart's heroism was now the talk of the nation, after one of the Catalan villagers of Lleida sent in a picture they had taken, during the arrival of Lockhart with the schoolgirls he had rescued. The slight, exhausted blond figure of Lockhart was carrying the unconscious eight-year-old Paula Comas in his arms. If ever a picture had been worth a thousand words, it was that one.

Not that Severus seemed moved or even convinced by this show of redemption. But others were. Public opinion seemed swayed so far in the direction of the nation's hero-turned-villain-turned-hero again, it might not be so difficult, to convince Scrimgeour of the efficacy of avoiding a public trial. And Severus proved a naturally receptive audience to the argument that if they left rebuilding Citadelle Xaphan to just Sirius and Remus, it would only be their corpses from deaths of old age that could be hidden from Voldemort there.

"We should use Lockhart as slave labor," was how Severus pitched the concept to Dumbledore, and Draco put his head in his hands.

"Okay," Draco said with a burdened sigh, "That's not how I'd put it. But what I think we should consider, Headmaster, is that Lockhart could be useful, if any of the story of his time at that hell castle is true. If you'd give me permission to leave Hogwarts in secret, I volunteer to interview him and assess his abilities to assist my guardians. And before you summarily reject my plan, I would think after the use *you* made of Lockhart, you *would* be at least a little sympathetic-"

"The use to which *I* put him?" Dumbledore echoed mildly. His blighted hand seemed to have altered none of his composure. The Sword of Gryffindor glittered nearby, and Draco could not help but take its proximity to Dumbledore as a threat. He kept telling himself that one of these days, he would get up the nerve to ask Dumbledore about at least some of his secrets, whether about Grindelwald or the Elder Wand or the Mirror of Erised. But he'd gotten nowhere close. It was easier to plead the cause of another, and use the remove of logic.

"You knew he was a fraud when you hired him, didn't you? I don't mean to be insubordinate, Headmaster, but please, don't pretend it wasn't obvious, not to someone with as much experience as you. You knew what he was and you hired him anyway. Maybe because you couldn't find anyone else, but maybe because you wanted to teach Harry something. He's your priority, isn't he, with that prophecy of Trelawney's? You wanted to show the dangers of fame, and what Harry *shouldn't* be. You used Lockhart as a cautionary tale, and let him slip away once he'd served his purpose. Fine. Machiavellian, but fine. Except now, I think he can be *of use* again."

"Such an interesting mind you have, Mr. Black," was Dumbledore's only comment on the accusation, but he proved receptive. He seemed to find the citadel suggestion a novel idea, with Lockhart's past predicament at Castell de L'Infern providing an opportunity.

"The issue, of course," Severus inserted silkily, "Is the trustworthiness of this proven *fraud*."

"Easy enough," Draco drawled. "*You'll* come with me to see Lockhart. If all goes well, he'll swear an Unbreakable Vow to me, the heir to House Black, to be obedient to our house until the citadel is completed. Something like that. Severus knows how to do those, he can oversee it for us."

Dumbledore endorsed the suggestion then. Leave it to him, he said, to speak to Scrimgeour, and arrange a meeting for them with Lockhart in Ministry custody.

It was only after they left Dumbledore's office that Severus let his displeasure show. "You waited to spring that part of your *suggestion* until in front of Dumbledore on *purpose,* did you not? How did you know I am familiar with such vows? You seem to have a habit, godson, of knowing things there is no rightful way you *should*."

An old chestnut of a lie was dredged up reliably. "I think my father told me once."

Dumbledore came through quickly, perhaps indicating that the restoration of the citadel was more urgent than he had let on. Severus sent for Draco before Astronomy. He lent him a dark

hooded cloak, and cast Disillusionment charms on them both, before leading Draco briskly and silently down the secret passage from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade.

Theo had already been on Draco's mind, as someone who would be there at NEWT-level Astronomy to notice Draco absent. At least Draco's issues with magical exhaustion would prove a ready excuse. But thinking of Theo's existence made the sight of a way into Hogwarts seem fraught with danger. When he pressed Severus, Severus told him of Madam Rosmerta's supervision of Hogsmeade for the Order, and her loyalty to Dumbledore. Draco, who knew personally what could be made of the poor woman's loyalty with one curse, questioned him still, until Severus also hinted at heavier warding for that secret passage.

"But Theo *is* a Hogwarts student. If he-"

"I *told* you, Theo is not a Death Eater. Moreover, he is a Slytherin and under my protection, whatever you believe of him. Are we here," Severus said coldly, "To find a helper for your guardians, or to give you an excuse to take your vendetta with the Nott family to its natural *close*?"

That silenced Draco, until they made it to a deserted alley, and could Apparate out to meet Kingsley Shacklebolt in a London alley. Severus took off the Disillusionment charms, and began to question Shacklebolt tersely, as he led them into a dark secret entrance to the Ministry.

Draco pretended to be astonished by entering another underground tunnel that night, though he had actually used this entrance twice, once with his father visiting Minister Fudge in the summer before fifth year, and once as a Death Eater, passing a message in the summer after sixth year. He pushed aside those memories, along with the awful thought of what Severus had called a *natural close*. He forced himself to pay attention to Shacklebolt telling Severus of the Aurors' experience with Lockhart.

Apparently, the once-strutting peacock was so ill-informed about the world, he had spoken glumly of the Dementors he thought he would be facing in Azkaban. The vampires had told Lockhart little beyond the rise of Voldemort. The Dark Lord's return had supposedly been an impetus making them bolder, with the eventual intent of joining him the way other dark creatures were. But the vampires hadn't specified Dementors in that group.

Dementors *would* prove a helpful threat to falsely hold over Lockhart's head.

"Here we are," Shacklebolt said, leading them right from the underground passage to the most closed and private of the Ministry's holding cells. Severus looked around carefully several times before leading Draco in. "Take as long as you need," Shacklebolt called, and shut the cell door behind them.

The photos in the Prophet had shown Barcelona's unlikely hero as thin and abused, dressed in mere rags. Still, they had not quite done justice to what the intervening years had done to Gilderoy Lockhart.

He was not quite so thin, after weeks in more generous custody than the Socis de Seguinus, but he was still a lean, gaunt, haunted-looking figure, wrapped from neck down in a large

gray fleece blanket. He was sprawled across the bed, staring up at the ceiling vacantly, before he heard intruders in his cell. He scrambled to his feet right away, with a trained reflexiveness like he expected to be punished if he did not react quickly. But then he staggered back, at the sight before him.

"*Severus*?"

In that one hoarse anguished cry, Draco could hear everything he needed to know. Even without the way Lockhart stared at Severus, once-smug blue eyes now heavy with new knowledge, turned as young and wondering as they could ever have been at the man before him.

"Severus," Lockhart said again. The hands that flew to his mouth, still keeping the blanket wrapped around him like a cloak, were a different man's, rough and worn from labor. "It can't be. Severus Snape... I'm going mad- no, I've *gone* mad..."

It was surely a sight that Lockhart had never thought he would be graced with again: the man he loved. He sank down on the bed again, as if it was that or falling to the floor with his weakened limbs. There was much of the same fixedness that moony stare had used to have on Draco's godfather. But it was the intensity, now, of someone who had climbed out of hell and seen the first real proof he was back among the living again.

"Whether or not you were always mad, Gilderoy," Severus said dryly, "Is surely a matter up for debate." Draco knew the feeling that came to Lockhart's face then: disbelieving elation to be insulted again by Severus Snape, when you thought that the grave would always lie between you, whether his or your own.

"You," Lockhart breathed reverently. "*Severus.* Severus, are you *real*?"

"Such a question," Severus intoned contemptuously, "*Would* tend to incline one towards a negative assessment of the questioner's sanity." There was dismay in Severus's eyes, though, albeit probably too veiled for Lockhart to notice. However little Severus had liked the man, the sheer devastation the years had wrought was too stark for *anyone* not to be stricken by it.

"You look..." What had looked to be impossible on that hopeless face appeared then: a smile. "You look... Severus, you look exactly the same..."

"Would I could say the same for you," Severus said dryly. "And your manners have suffered as well, Gilderoy. Am I to be the only one to be interrogated as to the veracity of my existence?"

Lockhart's dazed glance slid to notice Draco's presence for the first time, and clouded further with confusion. "Who are you?"

Draco winced, trying not to laugh. Severus had no such compunctions, chuckling coldly. "It *has* been four years, but surely you cannot be so incapable of recognizing one of your students. If only from *context clues*."

Lockhart stared blankly. He looked desperate not to disappoint Severus, if that might cut the miraculous apparition short. "Are you... er... Tony Boot?"

"Do you mean Terry Boot?" Draco said skeptically. "Or Tony Goldstein? They're both sixth-year Ravenclaws. You have the right age range, give him that at least, Severus..."

"It can't..." Lockhart drew back in astonishment. "It can't be Mr. Malfoy?"

"As a matter of fact, it is not," Severus said, factually, and Draco took pity on Lockhart.

"That was my name, yes, it's been changed since. It's Draco Lupin Black. Pleasure to make your reacquaintance, Professor Lockhart."

Lockhart stared down at his hand and then shook it. The roughness of those once-pampered palms was jarring, as was their new deep golden color. For some reason, Draco had imagined a life among vampires and anemia would render Lockhart pale, but he seemed to have spent enough time in the Catalan sun to bronze him. Along with his once-gelled golden hair grown long and wild down his back, a messy bedhead halo, Draco might not have recognized him, if they passed on the street. He supposed he couldn't begrudge Lockhart not recognizing him either.

There was another mitigating factor. "You're a Ravenclaw, though!" Lockhart said in astonishment. Under Draco's cloak, his blue tie was indeed visible. "Is it a disguise?"

"You have heard almost nothing of the world, have you?" Severus looked bored already with their task.

Draco looked between the men. "Severus, why don't you let me talk to Professor Lockhart for a while? You have catching up to do with Shacklebolt. I can find out what we need myself."

"Very well." Severus strode out without further ado, leaving Lockhart staring wistfully after him.

"So," Draco said. Lockhart turned obligingly. The desperation brought to his gaze from Severus's presence had relaxed. Draco doubted the man could guess the key to his salvation was in *Draco's* hands. "You might remember Vanishing all my bones. And do you know, by the way, that the girl you abandoned to the Chamber of Secrets, Luna Lovegood, happens to be my cousin? My *favorite* cousin?"

Lockhart did turn pale then, though that might have been the blue cast of the flames. "I didn't mean to- the Quidditch accident, right- and the girl in the Chamber- I didn't know. I'm sorry. I- is she alright?"

"Harry Potter saved her." Draco let him off the hook quickly. "The monster in the Chamber was a Basilisk. He slayed it with the Sword of Gryffindor. This is all news to you, isn't it?" Lockhart nodded, wide-eyed. "You must have a lot of questions." Draco decided to let the bone thing go. At least for now.

It should be revelatory, what Lockhart asked first. But it didn't tell Draco much he hadn't already surmised, for Lockhart to blurt, "How has Professor Snape been? Is he still teaching at Hogwarts?"

Draco groaned. "He's fine, as you can see. He's my godfather, by the way. Did you know that even?" Lockhart shook his head, looking stunned. It figured that a man good at little but Obliviating people- and, hopefully, castle-building- would not be good at the part of unrequited love that involved *knowing* things about your beloved. "He's the Defense professor this year, actually."

"I always did suspect he was after my job," Lockhart said, without malice. "I'm glad. Is he..." Lockhart cleared his throat. He seemed capable of attempting some deception still, if poorly, by the casual air he put on, as he asked, "He isn't, er, dating or married to anyone by now, is he?"

Draco couldn't help but laugh, much as he'd resolved to be as civil as possible. Respect would help win his way into Lockhart's confidence, gain him loyalties where so few others would show any regard, like picking up an unwanted chess piece for the dragon's side of the board. "No, Professor, he's not. You've heard Voldemort is back?" Lockhart flinched at the name but nodded. "Anything much else about the wizarding world?" Lockhart shook his head.

"You'll catch up," Draco said comfortingly. "But first, Professor, I'd like for you to tell me, in detail, everything that's happened since-" *Since you abandoned my favorite cousin.* "Since the first step you took out of Hogwarts. I'm in no rush."

"They said... they said I'm in jail because it's come out what I did, with my books, that I..." Lockhart stared down at his hands. "That I wasn't really the person who did the things I wrote about. And they've taken all my money. Even my Hogwarts salary. That the victims sued the publishing company, and the courts took my accounts and awarded them..."

"Yes, Professor," Draco deadpanned. "You are indeed not just broken, but *broke*."

Some of that furtive desperation was returning. "So you know I'm a fraud. You'd understand, then, why I ran rather than face a real monster. And yes, I'm aware of the irony, given where I ended up- but yes, I ran. I fabricated another assignment, wrote my resignation- I know no one believed me- and fled. I went to see an old friend in Spain, but I found out he'd passed. A hazard in the monster-hunting business."

Read, one of Lockhart's old victims. Draco couldn't let himself forget this man had been a remorseless criminal for years. Had he been planning to tap back at the same well?

"My old friend had used to love this monastery- his mother was named after it. He said it was a place he went to meditate, for guidance when he wasn't sure what to do. So I took a train out to Montserrat, even though it was closed for renovations. I magicked my way in and I prayed, the way my friend had taught me, and that's- that's when I met *him*."

Just that indirect reference had a ghoulish effect on Lockhart. No question who *him* was, then. "The vampire lord."

"Seguinus," Lockhart said softly. "I wish I could say he kidnapped me. Or that he used some kind of magic. But I spoke to him willingly. I went with him willingly. I knew he was a vampire. But he..." Lockhart looked at Draco nervously. "Erm, how old are you now exactly, Mr. Malfoy?"

"It's Black now," Draco reminded him, "And I'm sixteen, and queer, incidentally. So if you're trying to tell me Seguinus seduced you, there's no need to hide it."

"Yes! He seduced me!" Lockhart exclaimed, the first hint of his old dramatic side coming back, with the plaintive way he threw his hands in the air. "I was enthralled, but not by enchantment! By *him*! He drew me in... told me he wanted to show me his home... and, well, I *was* rather lonely..."

It took everything in Draco's heart, mind, and body not to burst into hysterical laughter. But he managed. "It could have happened to anyone," he said earnestly. Lockhart blinked at him dewily, before resuming a story that turned darker before long.

From the sound of it, the papers had gotten it mostly right. Save that pesky detail of exactly *how* Lockhart had ended up a captive at Castell de L'Infern.

He had lived at the castle ruins, thinking himself Seguinus's lover and partner for some span of time, before he began to get a bit wary of the men Seguinus first called his family, then his coven, and then admitted were his *followers.* Then Lockhart had noticed that none of their human visitors seemed quite as happy as Lockhart to be there. Nor did they ever seem to *leave*, and the influx of them was increasing. When there began to be screams from the lower levels of the castle at night- levels that Lockhart had been advised never to enter- well, Lockhart had began to make noises about needing to move along elsewhere. Much as he had enjoyed his time with the dashing and mysterious Senyor Seguinus.

But Lockhart had, being Lockhart, already vastly overexaggerated his expertise at castle repair. That had made the vampires unwilling to let him go so easily. Though if he hadn't lied, Draco thought, they likely would have just killed him outright.

Upon his first escape attempt, Lockhart had been demoted swiftly from Seguinus's lover to his captive, tasked with refurbishing Castell de L'Infern for larger rituals. And by that point, really, Lockhart ought to have learned enough Catalan for the place's name to have given him *pause.*

When the vampires discovered Lockhart's incompetence, that might have been the end of him, had they not also discovered one sole indisputable skill set. Memory charms were a great resource for any vampires determined to live separately from humankind. As for castle repair? In time, with sufficient motivation, even Lockhart learned. The vampires had old books on the subject, although they saw it as beneath them to engage in such labor themselves. So the one-time Ravenclaw had proved able to dedicate himself to studying far more than in Hogwarts days, considering his other options.

Lockhart's hands gestured vigorously in accompaniment, like he wanted to push out the lurid truth as quickly as possible by any means. His gestures grew more passionate as he spoke of the complete impotence he had felt under captivity, and the punishments that had awaited

him, should he attempt to help the other humans who were brought in and killed. He spoke of one escape attempt in his first year. He only alluded to how terribly he had been punished, but his eyes went distant at the reminder.

The shine of Seguinus Sade must have distinctly faded. Although from incidental detail in Lockhart's stories, Draco could glean that the man's residence had continued to be *within* the man's bedchamber.

Lockhart spoke of Sade in the past tense. It seemed he knew of the brutal death Sade had met, at the hands of the Bruixots de Sang. But from the dozen and a half dark purple-red fang marks that littered Lockhart's throat and wrists, those just where Draco could *see,* Sade's death might have come years too late, for Lockhart's sake.

The years had passed, with Lockhart the one human ever alive for long at Castell de L'Infern. In this rather high-octane study abroad experience, Lockhart had learned decent amounts of Catalan, Spanish, French, and a number of spells related to castle-building, as well as closing wounds. This repertoire of necessity was narrow but potent. It included powerful-sounding animation spells. The most interesting was a variant on Piertotum Locomotor called Piertotum Corporestitur, which for rebuilding a castle allowed the caster to direct the armor and statues- or, say, perhaps, *gargoyles*. And Lockhart had also learned gouging and digging spells, which he turned after his second year at the castle to digging himself a tunnel out, from the depths of the dungeons.

He had succeeded only to discover that through poor planning, it let up in the middle of a glacier lake. So he had planned to work at it until he got the underground tunnel all the way to the other side of the lake. Then twenty-five children had arrived, and plans had changed.

The rest was as the newspapers told, with Lockhart's habit of self-aggrandizing a distant memory. Maybe the results of bragging about castle-building skills had helped beat out some of his taste for it. If anything, Lockhart made himself sound *less* heroic than the interviews in the Prophet. He left out swimming with the girls on his back, or carrying them to safety.

When he finished, he sagged down upon himself, drained by the effort of recounting the ordeal. He waited meekly for Draco's judgment, not seeming to even think of asking questions of his own.

Draco could see the appeal such submissiveness would have had to a monster like Seguinus. That, and there would have been Lockhart's looks, the only bit of his once much-lauded celebrity glamour still with him. While Sirius and Aunt Bella had gone into Azkaban good-looking and come out looking like death itself, Lockhart looked better without the blinding-white teeth and primped peacock persona, false trappings stripped away. Traumatized and gaunt as he did strike one at first, his long hair and tan skin suited him, and the sadness more so, giving his blue eyes an appealingly soft, tragic air. Yes, he would find a great many sympathizers in the public, should this newly humble version take the stand. You didn't have to market-test to know this would sell.

But could Scrimgeour do that? Just privately sentence Lockhart to the custody of Dumbledore, and by extent the Black family, for however many years were judged

appropriate? Draco *had* read none of Lockhart's victims were interested in pressing more charges...

There was precedent. They *were* at war again. In the last war, abuse of power or not, Minister Bagnold had sent Sirius to Azkaban for *life* without a trial. It would seem child's play to remand Lockhart temporarily to a private rather than more public island prison for his sentence. Dumbledore had as much as secured an agreement for that, provided Lockhart be secured magically within the citadel...

The claims of castle-building hadn't been dashed. Nor did Lockhart seem difficult to control. And they had the Unbreakable Vow to secure obedience regardless, which Draco intended to keep to, no matter how submissive their new captive seemed. The only question now was running past the Order what he'd learned, lining up all the dots, and getting Lockhart caught up with what life held in store for him. It might seem another bitter irony to the man in time, rescuing himself from captivity in one ancient castle on the water, forced to rebuild it, only to end up in captivity in another ancient castle on the water, forced to rebuild it.

Except there would be no blood-sucking or blood sacrifices on the Isle of Xaphan.

That was, Draco *assumed*. He wouldn't be the one to judge Sirius and Remus for what they got up to in their spare time.

"Aren't you curious why I've asked you all this?"

Lockhart gave him his full attention back. It was hard not to be drawn into pity for those forlorn cornflower-blue eyes. The appeal Hermione had seen in the man was finally visible, in a very different form. Maybe she had liked him on some level for his weakness, veiled back then. That was Hermione. Patron saint of lost causes.

"I'm here to offer a chance to avoid Azkaban." That drew Lockhart's truly full attention. "My name is Draco Black now. You know that. But you don't know why. Did you hear about Sirius Black escaping Azkaban, before you ended up with the vampires?" Lockhart nodded tentatively. "Did you hear he was innocent?"

"Innocent?" Lockhart echoed wonderingly.

"So he's been exculpated, and he's married your successor at the Defense post, and I've been disowned and they've adopted me, and they've got this castle..."

From the stunned look on Lockhart's face, they were in for a long night.

It took only two nights after the first meeting to return, again in secret. Draco's formal interview with Lockhart continued, along with more covert negotiations of Draco's own. Meanwhile, Severus waited around discussing Death Eater attacks with Shacklebolt outside, and Dumbledore negotiated behind the scenes with Scrimgeour. By the morning of the following Sunday, when Draco came for his check-in, he was informed by an unenthused

Severus that the plea deal had been rushed through, with wartime ministerial provisions as justification.

"A complicated legislative business, which my burdensome godson need not to overexert himself to understand, save for the fact that he has once again *gotten his way* in the end." Severus eyed Draco like this was an accusation- seeming to sense, correctly, that Draco must have more of a vested interest in the case than he was letting on.

"It's just wonderful," Draco said, with a childish earnestness deliberately calibrated to infuriate Severus, "To be able to offer assistance to this project, isn't it? I'm so glad, just to do some small thing to requite the generosity of my wonderful new guardians, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin."

Even in the presence of Bellatrix Lestrange, Draco had never perhaps been eyed with so much malevolent intent. He beamed back at Severus, enjoying the majesty of his godfather's silently thundering stare. "So when are we going to go seal the Unbreakable Vow?"

The answer was that night. Severus had grumbled, but ultimately agreed to be the Bonder. He claimed it was because he trusted no one else in the Order to do it correctly, but realistically, Severus must want to be there to make sure his godson didn't pull any funny business.

Which *was* the beauty of having Severus there, conversely. Severus would always want to keep an eye on him, with an infinite skepticism towards Draco's ability to *not* get himself into constant, unnecessary situations of iniquity and damnation. But whatever he learned, he would likely keep to himself, or at least not tell those excellent new *guardians* of Draco's, that was for sure...

He had to count on that. Remus would surely not approve of the revision Draco planned to the official vow. Lockhart looked nervous as well, though that might just be from Severus's presence. None of their subsequent visits had made Lockhart stare any less moonily at Severus. Even if Severus remained comically unaware of Lockhart's foremost motivations in this bizarre, shadowy prison deal.

When Draco kneeled for the vow, too deep underground for any windows, the cell's dim light only showed his shadow. Lockhart remained sitting, watching Severus rather than following Draco. "Get on your knees, Gilderoy," Severus barked, oblivious to the effect those words in that imperious tone had on his admirer. Lockhart dropped to his knees like he had been shot.

Draco clasped Lockhart's right hand in the air. Severus drew his wand and stood above them, while Lockhart shot one last furtive look up at Severus, whom he seemed to find particularly arresting at this angle. Then Severus heaved one of his infinitely burdened sighs, and pushed his wand against their hands, a spark of readied magic fizzing at their skin.

"Go on. Speak the vow."

"Will you, Gilderoy," Draco began, "Share all your knowledge from the Castell de L'Infern with the lawful members of House Black for the rebuilding of Citadelle Xaphan?"

"I will," said Lockhart, and fire came from Severus's wand like a thin flaming whip and curled around their joined hands, bonding them magically together. The whole wand did not become a fiery whip, though, so Draco was spared that reminder of Bellatrix. But it did render a searing light against the gloomy low light so deep underground, reflecting in the pupils of Lockhart's downcast cornflower eyes like the fire was sinking in and taking over.

"And will you remain at Citadelle Xaphan for your sentence of five years, unless otherwise ordered by a lawful member of House Black, as long as the citadel remains within the hands of the lawful members of House Black or the Order of the Phoenix?"

"I will," said Lockhart, and another fire rope came from Severus's wand, knotting around the first and beginning the look of a net of light. Or a knot of one- a Gordian knot, one could call an Unbreakable Vow, though that stupid pun was the last thing Draco should be thinking of...

"And will you swear to defend Citadelle Xaphan from all of the enemies of the lawful members of House Black and the Order of the Phoenix, with your life if necessary?"

"I will," said Lockhart, although he looked less certain about his ability to be successful. He stared down at the third searing-bright rope like a real confine.

Severus looked ready to pull his wand away, with the planned vow finished. But Draco had one more part to add. "And will you, *ahead* of all other vows, always admit Severus Snape to Citadelle Xaphan, and protect and defend him there from all of his enemies, with your life if necessary?"

"I will," Lockhart said, not bothering to feign surprise. He looked more resolute in his devotion to Severus than the unknown castle.

Severus's eyes went wide in not so much shock as ire, but his wand issued the fourth and final rope of fire. It made a whipping spiral around their hands, securing the rest together as their backbone, making them pulse brighter with heatless fire.

"We are bonded now," Draco said with a baring of his teeth, "In your promise to me, Lockhart. See you do not fail me. Severus, have you borne witness to this bonding?"

"I have," Severus said through gritted teeth.

"Very well, then." Draco smiled at Lockhart, a genuine if wolfish grin. "The vow is complete. Let what magic has bonded together be never rent asunder." *Let not the knot be cut.*

"Let what magic has bonded together," Lockhart repeated earnestly, "Be never rent asunder," his eyes straying over Draco's shoulder to Severus as he spoke the words. He didn't seem to understand that had been a joke by Draco, not actually part of the vow.

Slowly, the fire of the ropes faded from sight, and then the ropes as well. Draco let go of Lockhart's hand, yawning as he got to his feet. He earned a glare from Severus that would have made a lesser man fall over his feet.

As it happened, it did. The lesser man of Lockhart was right there behind him, and caught in Severus's displeasure, Lockhart's attempt at getting up ended in falling back to the floor again. Neither of the other men there exactly bestirred themselves to help him up.

"What, Severus?" Draco said innocently, widening his eyes at his godfather. "Did I misspeak? I don't think I got any of the words wrong. Should I have said *never be* rent asunder, rather than *be never*? *Be never* does sound more appealingly archaic-"

"You," Severus hissed, "Are never receiving my assistance on any of your puerile little projects again, you devious little *cockroach* of a godson-"

"Oh, come now, Severus," Lockhart said, picking himself up with a valiant attempt at some of his old breezy charm. "It isn't that bad, is it? You'll have my protection now. A man can never have enough friends, I've always said, especially in these sort of- er- dicey times-"

"Some men," Severus snarled with exquisitely reserved venom, "Are less dangerous to have as enemies than friends." Then he turned to Draco, abandoning pretense, and growled, "Do you think you do me a favor, saddling me with this ill-crafted papier-mâché Niffler? If you wish to protect me, infernal demon godson, *purchase me a protective amulet.* Do not saddle me with a *clown*!"

Lockhart opened his mouth, usual submissiveness shaken by the need to defend his worth before Severus if no one else. But Severus raised a finger in his face that silenced him. "One word, Lockhart. One more word from that fraudulent tongue and that tongue will be inhabiting a *jar.* Soaked in formaldehyde and displayed on the desk of *your* old office at Hogwarts, as a caution for students who would do well to learn to be wise, before they are too old to learn-"

"In any rate, it's done," Draco cut in cheerfully. "He's stuck at Citadelle Xaphan regardless. He won't be any bother to you. So it's just in *case*. If nothing else, he could make a good human body shield, couldn't he?"

Severus eyed Lockhart with such infinite skepticism, it seemed he doubted Lockhart's ability to even perform that office. Then he swept out with so magnificently affronted a flourish of his flowing dark robes, the brutally insulted Lockhart was left staring in awe after him.

Eurydice Lilies

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Neville Longbottom didn't deserve to suffer like this. That much was beyond dispute. But he had been the one to worm his way into dueling practice. He ought to have had sense enough to know that when Draco was the instructor setting the curriculum, dark magic might be on the menu. And Draco wasn't about to pass up an opportunity like this when he saw it. How often would the Rat Thieves get such a willing test subject?

It had been bad enough for Neville, as his ill-fated attempt to spend time with Luna- trying and failing to get any information about her imagined attachment to Tony Goldstein- had ended instead in Hermione wiping the floor with him. But his duel with Luna ended even more quickly, dropping his wand in terror as it became slippery and red in his hands, only to look down and see both hands covered dripping in blood.

Neville screamed, and Draco sidled closer to get a better look.

"Oh, Luna," Hermione said disapprovingly. "Is this the Macbeth curse?"

"'Out, foul spot'," Draco said happily, tilting his head to admire his cousin's work. "Luna- Luna, that's coming along nicely. Come, look, we can study this more closely. Neville, are you starting to feel lightheaded? I don't *think* it's your blood that's coming from your palms, but I can't be sure... will you try wiping it off?" Neville just let out whimpers, until Luna pushed in to see better, and Neville made a valiant attempt. His hands seemed drier for a moment, before the attempt to clean them made the curse overcompensate, the crimson starting to drip down over the floor of the Room of Requirement. "Okay, good, yeah, that's what happened when..."

"Whose blood is this?" Luna asked, practically bouncing from excitement at her success, and Neville's face went a bit adoring, even with his hands streaming blood.

"I don't know," Draco said thoughtfully, and Hermione bristled at him.

"And you're teaching it to Luna anyway? Letting her test it on *Neville*?"

"I didn't think it would really hurt him," Luna said nervously, casting a furtive glance at Neville that seemed to try to conceal her solicitude towards him. It was obvious in that one look how much of Luna still wished she was dating Neville. Even if she had also enjoyed casting Verniculpa on him.

"It isn't dangerous at all! Smith and them survived! And I cast it on myself and never even got lightheaded... it certainly *smells* like real blood..."

"It's like raindrops now," Neville said in a small voice, the effort of self-suppression visible, as he stood there manfully letting himself be observed with his endlessly blood-producing hands.

"It's very kind of you, helping us practice like this," Luna said, sitting beside Neville and willingly touching him, for the first time Draco had seen in a while, to rub his shoulders comforting. From the look on Neville's face, the Verniculpa curse might just be worth it in his eyes for that attention, all the more when Luna told him, "You're being very brave." The fact that one of Luna's favorite pairs of earrings, her ornery pink armadillos, swung forward enough to gnaw a bit at his cheek? That just seemed a bonus.

Neville almost looked glum when Luna cast the counter-curse Vernidemnidas, since it made her stop the reassuring backrub she had been delivering. Hermione crisply vanished the blood from Neville and the floor, before casting a number of water and scouring charms. Neville shot a look out of the side of his eye like he might consider asking her to cast something else on him. "That was, er, a cool curse, Luna..."

"It's more a form of psychological rather than physical torment," Draco said brightly, and Hermione looked askance at him and Luna both.

"And you're teaching it to *Luna*?"

"It could be worse," Luna said brightly. "He's found out he's a pyromancer, apparently, and that's not just divination, that's fire manipulation. So he's plotting for the *next* spell he invents to involve dark fire..."

"Tattletale," Draco groused, and Luna blinked at him innocently.

"Oh, was that a secret?" Luna said, pretty blue eyes wide, "But everyone *knows* you love dark fire." She got an adorably furtive look on her face, before delivering a few more ostensibly comforting pats to Neville's broad shoulders. It looked like she wanted an excuse to touch them again.

Hermione was pacified eventually by Draco's solemn promise he would not test out, nor let Luna test, *any* fire-based spell without her supervision. Luna was the one who had to be dragged out by Hermione, once Draco asked Neville to stay behind after practice formally ended.

"Oh, if you're going to practice some new spell, I want to see," Luna kept pleading.

Draco had no intention of getting Neville cursed again. At least not *immediately.* Maybe later. Everyone around Draco, even his most near and dear, were not so much in a category of *uncurseable*, so much as *not currently being cursed*.

"So," Draco said once they were alone. "That was interesting. Still carrying a torch for my cousin, are you? Didn't mind her curse if it meant her fussing over you? I'd be surprised, if it

wasn't so Gryffindorish. Reminds me of *my* pet blunderbus, that..."

"No!" Neville protested hotly, cheeks going red. "No, I just..."

Draco studied his appearance more clinically. Neville was becoming more handsome. Moreover, his Herbology work had done wonders for his physique, over the summer as well as through the school year, Sprout's poor sucker of an overworked, unpaid assistant. He was built enough that Draco could understand Luna's reluctant fascination with his broad shoulders. That would undoubtedly ease the way for reconciliation, pleading more eloquently for Neville's merits than Neville himself could.

"I *want* you to get back with Luna," Draco said impatiently, at the risk of seeming a meddler. First Lockhart and now this, like Draco knew where everyone belonged and what everyone deserved. But acting to protect those nine names wasn't just about recruiting protectors, or even inventing curses. It was also about giving those nine names something more to fight for. "You're my friend too, Neville, and you've been miserable since she dumped you-"

"*She* hasn't been," Neville said glumly, staring down at his now-pristine hands.

Draco wondered if Luna's newfound friendship with Tony Goldstein was flitting through Neville's poor insecure head. "Neville," Draco said firmly. "How many people were in Dumbledore's Army?"

Neville blinked rapidly at that non sequitur. "I don't know. Twenty-five or so?"

"And who were the only people that mistletoe targeted?" Draco prodded. "You and Luna. And me and Harry, after everyone else left. You can ask Harry. I doubt he's forgotten. Does that strike you as a coincidence? There must have been some enchantment on it to only entrap couples who were..." He tried to think of something less trite than *meant to be together.* "Who both already had strong feelings for each other. Even back then."

"I didn't know it went after you and Harry too," Neville said with a sigh. "But that just makes me think more what I did then. *Dobby* put up the mistletoe, Draco, and he's Luna's friend- he's definitely *your* friend. He must have been the one to make it do that."

If that was true, Dobby was getting the best birthday present in human history this January. But Draco put on a clueless look, and brushed that aside. "You're a real chance at happiness for Luna, Neville, and I wouldn't be happy with just anyone dating her, that's for sure. I know that if something means enough to you, you can step up and be brave."

"You said," Neville said uncertainly, "Back when she dumped me, that I needed to show her I was passionate about her. That I should make a grand public gesture."

"Or just do something, to show she isn't super way more into you than you are to her. She wrote you a poem this summer, for Salazar's sake. I don't know, just write her a poem back or whatever."

It was only as Draco was making his way back to Ravenclaw Tower under the invisibility cloak that he realized he had just staked his favorite cousin's future happiness on the poetic

artistry of Neville Longbottom.

Oh, yes, he was a Ravenclaw par excellence, bar none. "I'm such a numbskull," Draco muttered, only to start when the eager knocker spoke to him. He did not like the idea of the knocker hearing that and taking his own opinion on himself too seriously. It already seemed to deliver him singularly pointed riddles, where he had heard others get simpler and goofier ones.

The knocker did not disappoint, as the melodic voice asked its riddle for the night. Draco did not think he had to have a persecution complex, to think it might be intimating its opinion on the artist formerly known as Draco Malfoy. "Why is an evil man like a worn-out shoe?"

It was almost too obvious. "Because their souls have been tread on so much," Draco said with a yawn, "That there is no longer any use to them."

"Well-reasoned," said the knocker, and the door swung open.

"Draco, you can't kill him," said Hermione, as he stared down at the body of Theo. "It's not right." The face of the ill-carved statue of Salazar Slytherin stared down at her, wishing her dead along with the helpless pureblood beneath her.

"Don't worry, Draco, he won't hurt you," said Luna, nudging the body with her foot. "See? Everything is going to be alright."

But Severus said from behind, voice in Draco's ear, "Do not be a fool, Draco. You cannot afford to be. You know what you must do. Take this to its natural close."

"Its natural close?" Draco asked helplessly. Hermione stepped between Draco and the body, but Luna pulled her aside, where they settled at Salazar Slytherin's feet.

Severus snorted derisively. "You already know it, vain boy. You've known it from the moment you saw the black dagger. *Set his blood on fire*."

"Draco? I have croissants for my dragon... what are you... *Draco*!"

Draco opened his eyes. He was in his bed in Ravenclaw Tower, in his Ravenclaw-blue silk pajamas, with the covers and pillows thrown aside. The talon wand lay over the blue sheets, where he had left it under the pillows, but the moonstone dagger was not beside it. That was in his hand, held to the throat of Harry Potter.

"Oh," Draco said, lowering the blade from Harry's neck and forcing a smile, one that felt rather manic on his own face. "Oh, it's you. Sorry. I was having a nightmare- Merlin, your skin-" A bead of red was visible over the November-pale curve of Harry's neck, sliding from a thin line to cut a stroke of ink towards his collarbones. "I'm so sorry..."

"It's okay." Harry's smile looked remarkably more genuine, as if Draco's response had only been par for the course. "I shouldn't have startled you. Is that why you keep your bed curtains locked?" Draco picked up his wand, ready to heal, and Harry bit his lip. "Kiss it better?"

The last hints of nightmare disappeared. "You *like* having me cut you if I'll kiss it after," he said softly. "Is that why you're being so calm?"

Harry shrugged. "Just don't cut me too deep," he said casually, pushing up his glasses. He raised his head to give Draco better access to kiss it. Draco did, leaning in and pressing a soft kiss to the cut that was already closing. It hadn't pierced the skin much.

Harry made a low noise as Draco did. He pressed a kiss to the bottom of Harry's chin, breathing in that reassuringly familiar scent. Then Draco cleaned Harry's neck off and healed the cut. "You said you brought me croissants?"

"You weren't at breakfast, and I don't want you to miss the match. We are still going together, right?"

Draco had forgotten. But he would have had to bestir himself eventually for it, for appearance's sake if nothing else. He couldn't miss attending his first ever Ravenclaw match as a Ravenclaw. Harry had even, Draco noticed once he poured enough coffee down his gaping maw, worn a deep blue jumper for the occasion. Bloody hell, did it suit him.

"Your dorm is so nice. And it's so much bigger than Gryffindor, even with an extra person here, I thought it would be crowded..."

"You've seen it before," Draco yawned, only to freeze when Harry denied it. "Or maybe that was a dream..." He made a show of stretching as he finished his coffee, lying back over the bed, which Harry had faithfully rearranged for him, wand and dagger both back underneath the pillows. "I don't know if I'll make it to the match, Harry. Stayed up too late researching..."

"Is that why you forgot to close your curtains?" Harry laughed. He put Draco's book on spell creation aside, before drawing up his feet. Draco made a face, and Harry quickly kicked his shoes off, then cast Spelunca secure and Inmotus, showing how well Draco had taught him certain things. "Here, I'll feed you, then, you lazy dragon..."

"What are you planning to *feed* me," Draco purred, stretching his arms over his head languidly, "That you have to lock and silence us in here, dragonslayer?"

Harry's cheeks reddened. "I told you. Croissants," he said stubbornly. "I just didn't think you'd like your dormmates getting to watch me feed you breakfast in bed. They were already so amused I was bringing it to you. It was Dobby's idea, he said you like these," he said defensively, and held up the almond croissant to Draco's mouth. "I'll clean any crumbs off your sheets after..."

Draco began to nibble at the croissant in Harry's hand, enjoying the feeling of Harry's fingers against his face as much as the sweet taste. "Spoiling me," he mumbled, and licked the first round of crumbs off Harry's fingertips. Harry let out a soft moan at the feeling.

"It's easy to spoil someone so beautiful," Harry said without affectation, immediate and earnest. Draco's own cheeks flushed, but he smiled up at Harry anyway, admiring him in that shade of blue. He was yet to find a color, though, that did not suit Harry Potter. "Sorry."

"For spoiling me, baby," Draco laughed, "Or calling me beautiful?" He rubbed his toes over the calf of Harry's jeans as he ate more from his hand, feeling very adored. It was a dreamy kind of feeling, but for the squirming it put in his gut, to have Harry lean over him in bed, and keep touching his mouth.

"You know," Harry said lightly, "I'm not *really* sorry." When Draco finished the croissant, he leaned down to steal a kiss. Draco turned his face aside with a smirk.

"Your fingers are still sticky," he said playfully, "I have to clean them first," and took Harry's hand and pulled it to his mouth. He sucked Harry's index finger in, watching him over it. He would have been embarrassed at the sticky sound, if Harry's eyes didn't look so hypnotized by him.

They made out for some time after that, with Draco still half-drowsy, clingy and happy, both of their hands wandering. Harry had set his watch on the turn of the hour before the match began, so they had no fear of missing it. "I'll let you borrow a Ravenclaw scarf," Draco promised between kisses. "You won't mind wearing that as much as a Slytherin uniform, will you?"

"No," Harry laughed, and sighed as Draco's hands slid through his messy hair, just mussing it up more. "You're so cute. I can't believe this is the same boy who just had a knife at my throat." Draco pressed fervent kisses to the healed place he had cut as a reminder. "Why do you still sleep with your dagger unsheathed under your pillow? I thought you got on with your Ravenclaw dormmates. You don't trust them?"

"I sleep with a knife under my pillow at *Grimmauld*." Draco bit lightly, feeling a slight fragility to the place he had cut, even healed. "Sorry, there's no excuse. It's not only a safety thing. I really love my dagger. And I must have forgotten the sheath. Not that I don't love your *present*..."

"You look so good with it," Harry admitted, hands sliding under Draco's shirt, before he made the effort to pull them back out. His hands left invisible impressions on Draco's waist where he had touched it, traces of warmth lingering like phantoms, warm and sticky residue like something melting. "Hermione said you've been practicing throwing it, in the Room of Requirement. Physically and magically." Draco nodded, sucking at Harry's throat more. "For dueling?" Draco nodded again. "You look so sexy when you hold that dagger."

Harry laughed after saying so, embarrassed even after the lulling effect of all their kissing, and made to play it off like it had been a joke, even though it clearly hadn't been.

"Really?" Draco got the dagger back from beneath his pillow. He posed with it, smirking, before turning it skillfully in his hand. He couldn't wield, say, the Sword of Gryffindor the way Harry had, but he was becoming a fair hand with a smaller blade. He tossed his hair back with a twist of his neck, getting it out of the way, and Harry's attention was such a drug.

"Did you like it? Having it at my neck?"

"Let me see," Draco laughed, and rolled Harry on his back over the blue sheets. He kept the dagger in his hand. Harry's pupils dilated completely, swollen lips parting. "This turns you

on, doesn't it? Or would you like it better the other way around? Don't look so serious, we're just playing around. And I know *excellent* healing spells, even if you slip. Come on, gorgeous. Wanna try?" He put the dagger in Harry's hand before rolling them back over. "Put it to my throat."

"You're insane, dragon," Harry said, but the look in his eyes was indescribable. Draco tossed his hair back, baring the long pale curve of his neck to Harry and the dagger, and stretched his arms over his head, letting his body arch before it dropped to the sheets again.

"Yeah, and you chose me anyway," Draco murmured, pressing his wrists together, only to purr and arch again when it was not the dagger but Harry's hand to stroke over his throat. "Fuck, Harry..." When Harry's hand settled there in a soft but unmistakable grip, Draco had to bite back a real moan, fingers free to stroke over Draco's skin, with the moonstone blade in the other hand.

"I think," Harry said softly, tongue sliding slowly over his own lips, "I like having you at my mercy," and leaned down to kiss Draco carefully.

"Oh, you're not *actually* fighting, are you? That does look like fun," Luna commented brightly. She was standing over them, bed curtains drawn open, her eagle headpiece flapping its wings with a judgmental look to the tilt of its beak.

"Harry, did you not lock the curtains right?" Draco hissed, mortified. Harry's pronunciation of Spelunca *had* sounded a bit impatient.

Harry looked about to leap off the bed, before he seemed to register his own situation, and rolled onto his side to hide his reaction.

"He didn't at all," Luna said brightly. "I didn't mean to intrude, I was just going down to the stands and I thought you might want to come. I know you don't want me coming to the boy's dorms, but I saw all your dormmates leaving, and anyway, it's been educational..."

Draco went off to get dressed, starting with the HJP necklace as always, without which his neck felt naked now. When he came back, a covertly smug Luna was playing clueless, making an increasingly desperate Harry plead for her not to say a word of this to Hermione.

Sometimes Draco thought Luna might have picked up a bit too much of her favorite cousin's personality for anyone's good. But he wouldn't change a thing about her nonetheless.

When Cho Chang caught the Snitch, Draco kissed Harry. It wasn't planned. If anything, he'd been telling himself to avoid PDA in this crowded setting. He didn't want any more photographs going off to the papers, diverting them off Lockhart back onto the Boy Who Lived, and that boyfriend of his, connected to so many suspicious deaths. But it was a rush of ecstasy, for once untainted, watching that Snitch catch. Draco found himself doing it anyway, pressing a square kiss to Harry's lips in excitement. Harry returned the kiss wholeheartedly.

To one side of them, he could see Ron and Hermione hugging with much the same enthusiasm, with Luna to the other looking sad. Neville hadn't come to the match. Draco shook Harry off and gave Luna the heartiest hug of the lot to make up for it.

He and Harry got their time together later at length, back in Draco's dorm room with all the other sixth-year boys down at the victory party. They only reemerged a while later, with much hooting and hollering from Draco's new housemates. They had gotten back just in time to avoid missing the evening's most memorable attraction- namely Neville Longbottom unequivocally becoming a Gryffindor at last.

"Erm," was the unpromising beginning of this long-awaited transformation. "Excuse me?"

The common room was full of happy Ravenclaws, along with nearly Neville's entire year in Gryffindor, and a smattering of Hufflepuffs. That included Auror-in-Training Diggory, who had hardly stopped fighting with Chang all night. But eventually, they all turned to Neville, once Ron had cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled out *Shut your traps* with far more volume. Neville looked startled to have their attention. Luna looked up from Ginny's side to regard him with unsuspecting curiosity. At least she'd taken off the eagle headpiece by now.

Draco grabbed Harry's hands and dragged him to sit beside Luna. He gave Neville an encouraging smile. Neville took a deep breath, then drew his wand.

"Luna," Neville said, clearly and loudly, "These are for you. Aparecium!"

All at once, the dreamy blue of Ravenclaw was broken by an explosion of cerise above them, like a firework gone off in amaranth pink, but a firework that lingered. The ceiling was covered in brilliant ruby pink Asiatic lilies. Neville waved his wand again carefully, and one bunch of the lilies floated down from the ceiling, with a Ravenclaw blue ribbon tying around the smooth bright green stems. "I know we're celebrating a victory in Quidditch," Neville said nervously, "And I want to congratulate you all, but I couldn't... I couldn't miss a chance to say, in front of as many people as I could, that- Luna..." Draco feared he would lose his nerve, but then he squared his shoulders, and got a look on his face like he could have slayed a giant snake.

"Luna," Neville said, tall and dark-haired and handsome in his Gryffindor uniform as he approached her with flowers in hand. "I want to tell you something, for everyone to hear." He offered the flowers, and she took them, looking stunned. "Do you- do you want me to?" he said, faltering to give her an out, if she wanted to avoid a public embarrassment for either of them. She shook her head, staring at him with pretty blue eyes wide as saucers.

"Luna," Neville said firmly, "I was a terrible boyfriend. I could never show you how much you mean to me- but you did, you mean so *much*. You're so funny and clever, and so sweet, and so brave- you're different from everyone else, and I love that. I wouldn't want you any different-"

"I thought you did," Luna said quietly. "Like- my poem was weird. *I'm* weird. And you were ashamed to be dating Loony Lovegood."

"I wasn't," Neville said, big earnest brown eyes focusing on her pleadingly. The entire room was silent. "Your poem was incredible. *You're* incredible. I was just ashamed of *myself*. I'm so awkward and clumsy, and bad at showing how I feel, but *what* I feel- you're the most incredible person I've ever met. You- you told me once, that you could climb down into hell and come out unscathed, and it's true. I know you've *been* through hell, but you're still here- still so strong- what you *mean* to me, Luna, it's like Orpheus. You make me want to change, to be a hero like that. *I* would fight for you like that, if you needed me. I would try and break down the gates of hell for you."

Nearby, Draco could see Hermione had tears in her eyes. Luna just looked so stunned, she could have been someone dead that Neville needed to bring back to life.

"I would have to try, because you're everything to me, Luna. Ever since you kissed me when the world was ending. At the citadel, when we separated- when I saw you again, I *knew*- so... so you don't have to take me back. You don't have to do anything. But if you want, just if you'd like," he finished more simply, "Will you please, um, come to the Christmas party with me?"

"What..." Luna breathed, looking lost, before she climbed to her feet, hand shaking where she held the bouquet. She smelled it, eyes wide. "What flowers are these? Are they lilies?" Draco turned to Harry and smiled at him, taking his hand at the word *lily.* "Tiger lilies? But they're red..."

"They're called Eurydice lilies," Neville said, seeming to fumble more that he was past the part he'd planned. "Like... like in the story. I read it in the book you gave Hermione, and I thought of you, of what you said about going down into hell... Luna, you're like Eurydice to me-"

Luna stepped forward and kissed him, bouquet falling from her hands unnoticed. Neville was tall enough that she had to strain up on her tiptoes, hands planting on his chest, as her messy light hair fell in a wave down her back. Neville's hands went to stroke through it and cup her face as he kissed her at first gently and reverently, like she *was* some kind of nymph returned from the dead. But then Luna kept pressing her mouth to his insistently enough that they were kissing wholeheartedly, with passionate abandon before the dozens of students.

Neville only pulled back once the cheering began. Whooping spread through the common room, Tony amongst the loudest. Draco let out a few cheers himself, while Neville looked more uncertain. Then Harry, his priorities ever in place, asked, "Does this mean Draco is free to go to the Slug Club Christmas party with *me*?"

"Yes, Harry," Luna said, rolling her eyes. She pulled Neville to sit beside her on the rug and kissed him again. "Oh, Neville, you have to be my boyfriend again, please say you will!" Neville nodded with a stupid grin on his face, before indulging Luna in everything she asked for.

It was only once Luna had kissed his face half off, perched over his legs with a look in her eyes like it was *heaven* she would need to be dragged out of, that Neville seemed to become more civic-minded. "I should, um, Vanish all these flowers, or move them," he said

sheepishly, and raised his voice. "Erm, Ravenclaw, I'm sorry, I'll go and get rid of the flowers now-"

"Leave them up!" Padma Patil shouted to a chorus of approval, and leaned her head against Tony's shoulder. Luna took his as her cue to snog Neville some more, grip on his shoulders possessive now, like this was a miracle she was not about to let slip through her fingers.

Draco picked up the bouquet for Luna and stared at the flowers. They *were* much the color of amaranth, though they were lilies. The reminder of amaranth sent a phantom unease through him. As did, for some reason, the unfamiliar name. "Hermione," Draco called, leaning past Harry to touch her hand. Ron was grinning with an arm around her shoulder, gently teasing her for her sentimentality. "Hermione, what story did he mean?"

"Oh, Ronald, if you knew the *story*- Draco, it's Orpheus and Eurydice, I'm surprised you don't know. You like other Greek mythology, don't you?" She held up her bracelet, indicating the Medusa head. This myth did sound vaguely familiar, though Draco couldn't place it.

"Orpheus was a great musician. He fell in love with a nymph called Eurydice." She swatted at Ron, but let him keep his arm around her. "Except she was bitten by an adder on their wedding day and died. Orpheus was so overwhelmed with grief that he went after her. You know, here, the underworld was a place. Ruled by the god Hades. He played his lyre for the god of death- oh, don't make that face, Ron, it's L-Y-R-E, like a sort of harp- and he played so beautifully that Hades agreed to let him take Eurydice back with him. But there was one condition."

"Yes," Luna said, finally breaking off from Neville's kiss to push her head forward, blue eyes shining. "She had to follow, and he had to not look back at her, until they made it all the way out of hell. But he looked back, so the deal was broken, and he had to leave her behind."

Draco didn't understand why he was so afraid, why his heart had skyrocketed in his chest, why his breathing was beginning to constrict. It was like he was in a very dark hallway, approaching a door left ajar, knowing he should not open it and see what was behind it, while knowing at the same time that he was *going* to open it. "Do... do you have the book with you? I'd like to read it."

"Hermione lent it to me," Neville explained, and went and got his bag from the corner of the Ravenclaw common room. He'd been in there all during the Quidditch match, setting up the lilies with Dobby's help, and seemed to have been looking over the legend again in preparation, with the book marked to a chapter near the middle. "Here. Hermione, can he borrow it too?"

Hermione nodded, and when Draco read the name of the myth, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, he was eighteen again, standing before a shattering mirror. *Eurydice.*

This was how it had been written. Ecidyrue backwards was Eurydice. And when the mirror had broken, he'd heard music.

Dear Mr. Black,

I am HERE! I have arrived at this lovely island thanks to your intervention, and I am writing to offer you my heartfelt gratitude! I was transferred to Dumbledore's custody a few days ago, then to your charming uncle's. Now I am settling into my new home- the Citadelle Xaphan! Admittedly, it is a bit of a fixer-upper, but if it wasn't, what would you need me for?

What a place! What a singular place, with such interesting gargoyles and their flame-making things! The last castle where I resided was in far worse condition upon my arrival, and it was in better shape by the time I departed- though your uncle informs me there was a battle between the residents and the Spanish Aurors that decimated much of it again. Ah, well, c'est la vie. Your uncle has been involved in a great deal of complicated warding for the Isle of Xaphan, so hopefully, my work here on this far lovelier castle will not meet the same fate.

Yes, I describe Xaphan as lovelier, first and foremost because it is on the sea. You cannot imagine the good it does me to see the ocean again. There are walls, but I am allowed outside them. Your uncle's estimable husband has been generous enough to show me a path down to a small beach, hidden below a massive white cliff face. I am allowed to go anywhere I like on this sprawling rocky island, as long as I do not leave it. I would not have been afforded such luxurious views in Azkaban.

Sirius and Remus have told me much of what I missed in captivity- I do not consider Xaphan captivity- and I have been told you were the impetus behind this reprieve from the start. Second chances are a rare thing, especially to those who have not deserved them. And I know I did not deserve this chance. I will always be in your debt for it.

I remember you as one of my best students, although in truth I was not much of a professor. Congratulations on your O on your Defense OWL! I believe one day you could make a fine Auror. You must already be a fine duelist, if you follow at all in the footsteps of your godfather.

But I fear my mind is not all it used to be, though I hope the sea air will improve it. Speaking of Severus, I was pleased to learn he will be my liaison to Dumbledore at Hogwarts, and to you, to whom I made the Vow. This proximity, I hope, will also allow me to fulfill the last part of the Vow to the fullest. I do believe Severus has kept that part to himself. I will follow his example.

Please, Mr. Black, never hesitate to make use of this channel to request any favor. I am anxious to repay you however I can. Even if it would be impossible, even were I not an exile, and- one must admit in good faith- an individual with a more narrow skill set than alleged in my published works. Severus has informed me that any assistance of mine is "less likely to improve than imperil"- such a way he has with words!- but I fear his assessments seem colored by a distinctly personal dislike. If you have any advice how to redress whatever wrongs I may have done Severus, I would be anxious to follow it, and languish in his displeasure no longer.

In any event, I will do what I can to not aggravate him too severely, and protect him as I have sworn to do. I am at his service as well.

Your faithful servant,

Gilderoy Lockhart

"Did you read this?" was Draco's first question as he pocketed the letter, finally taking a sip of Valerian tea. Severus looked like the topic left a bad taste in his mouth.

"Do you not think I have better things to do with my time than examining the musings of a goldfish-brained marsupial? Nor is my time so cheap as to waste it *discussing* him. And surely *you* have more pressing matters to address. You will not have another check-in this week, even if you squander this one. Rest assured I am none too pleased to have been reduced to your glorified post owl-"

"Oh, that's a shame," Draco said brightly, "Since that's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. It'll just be a bit more time spent as an intermediary on my behalf. You have the ear of Dumbledore, whatever price you pay for it-"

"Kindly find a point eventually," Severus drawled, throwing back the rest of his tea and staring balefully at the dregs. His face looked singularly ghostly in the green firelight, his limp, thin strands of dark hair hanging in the way of it and casting shadows. "And none of your puerile attempts at manipulation or finesse-"

"I need you to talk to Dumbledore about the Deathly Hallows for me."

"Ah," Severus said mildly. "So you have somehow not yet relinquished this escapist fantasy-"

"The Hallows are real," Draco insisted, "And Dumbledore has the Elder Wand."

There was so little reaction on Severus's face, that was a reaction in itself. The additional control being exercised meant there was something to hold back. Any new wariness did not seem towards Dumbledore, but towards Draco.

He knew. He knew already, and he didn't want me to know.

Or Dumbledore *didn't want me to.*

"You believe this?" Severus asked neutrally.

"I *know* it," Draco said fiercely, and Severus's dark eyes then were painful on him.

"Ah," Severus intoned. "One of the many things you claim to simply *know*, without any explanation how or why- or at least willingness to give that explanation to your godfather-"

"Most of the time, I'm right, aren't I?"

A flash of anger showed through the front of passivity. "Indeed," Severus said in a low voice. "Indeed, you so often are. And *why is that*?"

Draco had considered trying to claim he was a psychic or seer or something, but he was too doubtful of his ability to pull off such a farce. Especially with his godfather.

"You certainly," Severus said wryly, "Cannot blame *this* belief on your father telling you."

Draco went on the offensive. "He won it in his duel against Grindelwald. *Obviously.*"

"The Elder Wand," Severus said with an exquisite eye-roll, "According to the legend, can only be claimed through the *murder* of the former owner. By all reports, Grindelwald has been imprisoned in the castle of Nurmengard for decades, very much alive-"

"It doesn't *take* a killing, just defeat-"

"And how do you claim to know *that*, Draco?"

Counterproductive as it was, it was some satisfaction to turn wide young guileless eyes to Severus then. He indulged in the kind of circular reasoning that would, if not draw any answers out of Severus, at least punish him for his feigned ignorance, by having to tolerate Draco's own. "Because Dumbledore has the Elder Wand, of course."

Severus gave him nothing, but then, Draco had hardly expected him to. He hadn't given Draco much about Theo, save his conviction that Theo was not a Death Eater. Well, Theo was on the backburner now. He seemed to be avoiding Draco rather than following him these days. Perhaps he was reverting to type, spending the majority of his waking hours at the library alone, or sometimes with Astoria. Draco had bigger worries than Theo at the moment. He knew Dumbledore would be in his office for Harry's private lesson tomorrow night. So he went outside to wait.

It was a torturous infinity of pacing before the entrance opened. Draco raced to catch the door before it closed behind Harry. He had to reach across Harry to pin the door open against the wall, and Harry took that as Draco rushing to see and touch him. He lit up, using their proximity to give Draco a kiss.

Even as anxious as Draco had worked himself up to be- this was the first time in either timeline that he had actively sought out the company of Dumbledore, save for his murder- it was hard not to get lost in Harry's kiss. But eventually Harry pulled away, grinning at Draco in a way that suggested they'd be heading straight to the Room of Requirement if Harry had his way. Draco had to make Harry's face fall by admitting, "Sorry, I'm actually here to see Dumbledore."

Harry looked fearful. "Are you alright? Are you in some kind of trouble? Is your godfather?"

"No, nothing big," Draco lied, "Don't worry, I'll see you tomorrow," and gave Harry another quick kiss before shifting them around, letting the door fall shut between them.

Dumbledore was seated at his desk, hands folded before himself sedately. He looked so unsurprised to see Draco, it was likely Severus had said something. "Ah, Mr. Black, come in," Dumbledore said, as if he had summoned Draco. He gestured to take a seat.

Draco found it hard not to stare at the Sword of Gryffindor, the gleam of bright rubies like fresh blood transmuted right to gems. It was so difficult to look Dumbledore in those piercing unsettling blue eyes, it was already tempting to look almost anywhere else.

"How may I help you?"

Draco supposed, with a glance over at the Sorting Hat, that he ought to have thanked Dumbledore for letting him be put into another house. But the time to do so with any semblance of grace had passed. He just tried to project confidence. He might have tried to play it innocent, the sweet inquisitive little Ravenclaw- much like Luna, though even in Luna that exterior had become more of a facade by now- but Severus seemed to have already irreparably poisoned the well.

"The Deathly Hallows." Draco might have mentioned the Mirror of Erised then, but he had decided not to yet, lest Dumbledore take the mirror from wherever he was keeping it and spirit it forever out of Draco's reach.

Dumbledore peered at him over his spectacles with a detached but kindly grandfatherliness. "I was told that has become an interest of yours."

"And you've heard it's tied to what's wrong with my wand?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said, offering his dish of small yellow candies. They were in the shape of small lemons with little faces, so cute it actively nauseated. "Lemon drop?"

Draco took one and popped it in his mouth defiantly. He brought his teeth down on the tartness beneath the layer of powdered sugar with an audible crunch. "You're the one with all the answers."

"Oh, that is hardly true," Dumbledore commented, and began to suck unperturbed on a lemon drop of his own. Draco might just have been imagining it on his end, but the tension in the air had his nerves flaring like Dumbledore had visibly reached for his wand instead. "Though rest assured I am most honored to hear that sentiment, from a young wizard of such unique talents."

"Do you know the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice?"

Dumbledore's face fell, for so slight a moment that Draco might have imagined it. Blink and Dumbledore was fully smiling. "I do. I confess myself rather an admirer of Greek myth-"

"They're tied to the Hallows," Draco interrupted, "To the Resurrection Stone. Have you ever heard anything like that, sir?"

Dumbledore's face didn't change. "Mr. Black, I fear I must be the one to disillusion you. The Deathly Hallows are no more than a fable, written to advise children of the fallacy of not accepting the reality of death-"

"I know they're more," Draco snapped. "And you know too, and I *know* you know."

"What would make you say that, Mr. Black?" Dumbledore popped another lemon drop into his mouth. Merlin, was he excellent at playing dumb.

"You want me to be useful, don't you?" Draco pried. The manipulation felt too overt to be effective, but he tried nonetheless. "I'm someone who fights for your side. I'm a useful chess piece. And this is something that could take me off the board. An *unforced error.* An unnecessary sacrifice, just because you weren't willing to let the piece know all the ways it was capable of moving."

"Taken off the board," Dumbledore echoed. "Because you fear you will *be* taken out, Mr. Black? Or do you mean *you* would be the one to take yourself away, from what you call 'my side'?"

Draco was being reckless with his words, but the time for any retreat had passed. "I want to know the game really being played here."

"We are at war. Would you say that is a game?"

"For some people it is." Draco made an involuntary grimace that bared his teeth. "I know the Hallows are real. Either you're wrong or you're lying-"

He never would have thought of himself speaking to Dumbledore this way, not in a million years. Until he saw the way *Eurydice* was written, and understood the stakes he had been ignoring. He thought he remembered thinking of himself dead before that mirror- of *Harry* dead. He remembered thinking of Severus's funeral and wishing him alive again...

"Mr. Black," Dumbledore reminded him gently, "I had thought your foremost mission was to protect those you care about in this war. Not to chase fairytales."

The implicit accusation was stinging, though a retort immediately sprang to Draco's lips: *If I can't understand or control my power, how can I protect anyone? Or be sure I won't become someone they end up needing protection* from? But this forthright man-to-man approach seemed to be getting him nowhere, against holier-than-thou Gryffindor stubbornness.

"What is Severus's mission? To die for you? That's the way it's trending," Draco spat. Dumbledore didn't react. "*Severus* is a valuable chess piece for you. Second to none. Except, of course, for the Boy Who Lived. Prophesied to kill Voldemort. Even to him, you only dole out information in the smallest crumbs." Draco glanced towards the Pensieve, then back at Dumbledore. "He doesn't question that state of affairs. For now."

He hadn't needed to make the threat obvious. "You are saying," Dumbledore commented, as benignly as if they were discussing the year's first snow, "That given the great influence you

hold with Professor Snape and Mr. Potter, one would do well not to displease you, by refusing to tell you things that you think are true."

"But what?" Draco growled. His right knee had started bouncing restlessly. He put a hand down to still it. "You know what's best for everyone, right?"

"Mr. Black," Dumbledore said, leaning forward with his tone more serious, "I assure you, I *will* tell you everything you need to know. You have a large role to play, in the war to come. Larger than you could imagine." There was something foreboding in that controlled voice as he went on, "Larger, perhaps, you will find, than you can bear. When the time comes, there will be no escaping it. But until then, I must implore you to be patient. Believe me, our goals are the same-"

"How long do you expect me to keep killing time playing possum?" Draco regretted the lemon drops. The aftertaste of the powdered sugar was cloying on his tongue. "How long am I meant to maintain the farce that I'm a normal sixth-year and school and classes even matter? Putting me into a different house than the boy whose father I killed, yes, it's *convenient,* but it doesn't change the fact that I am a murderer-"

"I expect you to do what is best for Harry. What will keep him safe. If you truly love him." Dumbledore's eyes dropped to the initials around Draco's neck, as if questioning whether Draco was worthy to wear them.

For the first time since it happened, the flash in his mind of green light that sent Albus Dumbledore falling from the Astronomy Tower was a welcome memory.

"I'm not like everyone else, Dumbledore. You can't control me. And you can't predict what I'm going to do, either."

"Where is the joy in life," Dumbledore mused serenely, "Without a spot of unpredictability?" His tone was indulgent, as if facing nothing worse than the tantrum of a spoiled child.

Draco stood up and slapped both hands on the face of the desk. The Sword of Gryffindor rattled, and threatened to fall. "Where are the other two Hallows?"

"The other two?" Dumbledore asked mildly, smile not changing. "Which do you believe found?" *As if Severus didn't* tell *you I know about your wand-* "If the Hallows *were* real, and you obtained them, what would you do with them?"

Dumbledore waited until it was clear Draco had no answer. Then he unfolded his hands, leaned back in his chair, and popped another lemon drop in his mouth. "Goodnight, Mr. Black."

Stille Nacht

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco had waited outside Dumbledore's office for Harry, and Harry had returned the favor. "We can talk in the Room of Requirement," Draco said impatiently. When they arrived, Draco insisted on being the one to pace in front of the entrance, to tell the room what they needed

"Um, Draco. Why is there a bed?"

Draco flopped onto it. "I need to lie down. I might be getting a headache."

"Oh." However worried Harry seemed, that was not without a note of disappointment. "Can I get you some medicine?"

"Already took some," Draco lied.

He almost thought he didn't want Harry there, would rather just lie alone thinking vicious things about himself. Except Harry offered, "Maybe I could, um, massage your head?"

"Knock yourself out," Draco muttered. Harry sat down and pulled Draco's head into his lap. Draco would have been so inquisitive in Harry's shoes, but Harry seemed content to sit like this, hands sliding through Draco's hair to massage the temples.

"Mmm. Be soft. Good. That's good. Mmm... don't stop..." It was incredible, how the rage seemed to subside, just from the comfort of Harry's touch. Draco's eyes shut, and stayed shut. Harry really was a dragontamer.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked sometime later, when Draco had relaxed. When Draco heaved a sigh, Harry's fingers strayed to Draco's lips. Draco leaned forward to kiss his fingers one by one. He couldn't see Harry, but he could practically hear his smile. "You wanna tell me?"

"I just hate," Draco mumbled, "Feeling helpless." Harry's hands stilled, and Draco made a kittenish protesting noise. Harry laughed, but there was bewilderment in the sound.

"You? Helpless?"

"What, is it that hard to believe?" Draco felt like an ostrich with his head in the sand, telling himself they could stay like this forever, and everything that wanted to hurt them was magically gone. "Just because you think I'm *powerful*? I'm going to sound full Ravenclaw,

but seriously, power without knowledge is useless. Someone told me once- when wielded incorrectly, having power is *worse* than being powerless."

"Your godfather?" Harry guessed wrongly. "I'm sorry. But you don't seem helpless to me..."

"I thought you liked me helpless." Draco opened his eyes. Harry had taken off his glasses. Perhaps his mind was not so pure as Draco had been imagining. "Manibipiscatus."

"Please don't ever tell anyone I like to do that," Harry whispered, mortified. Draco kissed his fingertips, then sucked two into his mouth. "God, Draco, you're so..."

"I'm always helpless," Draco breathed, letting Harry's fingers go with a wet pop. "When it comes to you. You know I'll do whatever you say, don't you?"

"You mean, like, um, in bed?"

"Yes, genius, in bed." Draco nuzzled the back of Harry's hand. "There's all *kinds* of things I wish you'd tell me to do..."

Draco found his helpless feeling attenuated with Harry's attention fixed like this, lovely and desiring and caught. "I just want to," Harry breathed, "Help make you feel better..."

"Do you know," Draco said carelessly, "What would help me forget about everything but you?" Once Draco nuzzled between Harry's legs, the meaning was clear enough. "I want it."

"You say that like it's for you, not me..."

"It is." Draco kissed at the clothed shape. "I love how it feels in my mouth. You're so thick, and so *long*- I love when I can get you in my throat- how *can* I think of anything but you then, when I can barely even *breathe*-"

"I'm so bad at it compared to you..." Harry petted his hair softly. "You don't mind? You're going to kill me one day, just by talking... want me to get it out?" Draco moaned, and Harry hurried to comply. "There. You really want it so much, dragon?"

"Yeah, come on, let me... if the way I talk is too much to take, then *shut me up*..."

"You're going to be the death of me," Harry said reverently.

Draco tried not to think of ways that could literally come true, as he licked out at his reward, the dragon's treat for being tamed. He never wanted those electric eyes to look at anyone else like this. "I love you, Harry," he said, and drank in the warmth of Harry's still slightly disbelieving smile, before he closed his eyes and set about forgetting.

Oblivion didn't last long. But it was still oblivion in that moment.

The discovery of the Eurydice myth had felt like a watershed. It had pushed Draco into action, even confronting Dumbledore. But he couldn't explain to Hermione how vital their

research had become. He pinned his hopes on the Black library. They would figure this out with intelligence.

Oh, and he also had a plan to steal Veritaserum from Slughorn's stores. Just in case intelligence fell through. But only Gryffindors approached something vital with just *one* plan. And in his defense, it wasn't like he was the only one with nefarious plans surrounding that damned party.

As the first Christmas with Aunt Bella officially at large, reminders of her favorite holiday were less untainted. But mistletoe was the worst part, even if he didn't have any attempts to catch him by Pansy to avoid. Harry was the only one who tried it. Most people tended to jump to the other side of the hallway, at times plastering themselves to walls, to avoid Draco. Harry was popular again, vindicated in the press. Even the one specter, possibly having killed Pettigrew, seemed to have been retrospectively applied to Hogwarts's celebrity murderer, Harry's boyfriend.

But the qualifications of that boyfriend to punish interlopers did not stop girls from gathering under mistletoe when Harry passed. One would have thought those girls valued their tongues and noses more vitally. But Hermione explained they didn't think they could be faulted, if it was 'the mistletoe's fault'. Harry didn't seem to take it seriously, laughing and protesting his Quidditch-given ability to dodge antagonistic obstacles.

Draco was left panting with both exhaustion and frustration, after yet another mob of mistletoe hopefuls. It had him sprinting to make it to Defense, before Severus could take even more points off Gryffindor, and give Draco another infinitely judgmental eyebrow raise. And that wasn't even the worst part. "Harry, I'm still the only one who's ever kissed you, right?"

"Yeah. It's the same for you, right? Don't *you* let anyone catch you either!"

The images of stag horns, blue sheets, black feathers, the smell of Harry and amaranth swam through his mind. He dismissed it as a dream. "Yes."

It was hard not to fall deeper into obsession with someone when you knew what they tasted like. He should have taken his experience with Theo as a warning there. Except he didn't think he'd ever been in love with Theo, at least not the way he was with Harry. The thought of anyone else getting their lips on Harry's mouth, let alone any choicer part...

"No, Draco," Hermione said in the library that afternoon, rolling her eyes, "I do *not* think you should put out a *public service announcement* about what becomes of tongues that kiss Draco Black's boyfriend."

"I think it's a wonderful idea," Luna said brightly. "If anyone else ever tried to kiss Neville, I would use Verniculpa on them. I'd like to practice it more. I don't know if I remember the counter-curse, but I prefer it that way..."

Neville had fallen so deep down the Luna rabbit hole, this proclamation made him look *more* moony-eyed and grateful to be holding hands with her.

"Draco," Hermione said severely, "Girls *are* going to like Harry. That's what being young and famous does..."

"Speaking from *experience.* I suppose you'd know, dating Viktor Krum, wouldn't you?" Ron sniped.

"Ronald," Hermione said, taking his hand. "Who am I dating *now*?"

"Um," Ron said, a slow grin spreading over his face. "Me? Uh, I think?"

"Yes, *Ronald*," Hermione said irritably. She turned back to her Arithmancy homework, but didn't let go of his hand.

"You should know, some of the Gryffindor girls have love potions. Mail-ordered from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes." Luna was unperturbed by dagger eyes from Hermione. "Hermione caught a great lot plotting to slip Harry some- they want him to take them to Slughorn's party. That Romilda Vane was one-"

"Draco," Hermione snapped, "*Put your wand away.* I reminded them who Harry *is* taking, and the consequences that tend to befall those who cross you. They got the message eventually."

"It's true," Luna said happily. "I went to find Hermione, and when I came in, they were all cowering against the wall. Not because she was yelling. She was just describing some of the curses she'd witnessed you cast. How they would be felt by the victim. Several of the girls were crying."

"Cor, Hermione, that's brilliant!" Ron eyed her with admiration.

"Well," Hermione said huffily, "Harry *is* one of my best friends, and really, Draco, not that I *approve* of you threatening people with curses, but being that you *have* this reputation, those girls ought to have more *sense*..."

"Who was crying?" Harry slid into his seat beside Draco.

"Held up by your adoring fans?" Draco asked balefully. "If you let one of them kiss you-"

Harry pressed a kiss to Draco's mouth, cutting him off. "I love it so much when *you're* the one who's jealous."

"Don't accept *anything* given to you, or left anywhere *near* Romilda Vane. The very fact I have had to learn the *name* of a Gryffindor fourth-year is such an appalling indignity, it is- mmm..."

"Harry isn't kissing anyone but you, Draco," Hermione said with a smile as Harry cut Draco off with another kiss. If she had seen where Harry's hands had gone under the table, she might have looked more judgmental.

Then again, maybe not. Ron's hand had gone to stroke along her forearm, leaned against her side, eyes fixed on her. And it was only what Hermione deserved.

"Do you know who might have answers about the Deathly Hallows?" Draco asked Hermione, in none too soft a voice, as they left the library together. "Grindelwald."

"Very funny, Frankenstein," Hermione sighed. "Anyway, for the party-"

Her voice trailed off as Draco stopped walking. Two green Slytherin ties were the brightest color in the gloomy corner, where Astoria Greengrass was on her tiptoes, kissing Theo with her arms round his neck. His hands were in her long dark hair. Theo was kissing back with single-minded aggression Draco remembered too well.

Hermione's eyes went so wide, it seemed she had taken on more of Draco's wariness of Theo than he realized. She stumbled over uneven stone, and both Slytherins looked up. Theo pulled away calmly, no expression in his dark blue eyes.

Without the length of Astoria's hair, Draco might have mistaken her for her sister. She had grown up a lot without Draco noticing. He'd used to sit with her every day, let alone the hours spent every week with the Kingsnakes. Now she was a virtual stranger. If only Theo could be the same.

Theo regarded them without a hint of disquiet. "Mistletoe," he said, pointing up. They'd had a cul-de-sac here with girls lying in wait for Harry more than once. Then Theo stepped off from Astoria and walked briskly away. After a moment, Astoria left, in the opposite direction.

Hermione was clinging to Draco's arm. "Theo... he..."

"What?" Draco forced a smile. His heart was pounding like he had caught Theo covered in blood. "Theo *is* Lord Nott. Natural thing, to look for a pureblood girl to wed as soon as possible, to produce a Nott heir..." Except if it was a rush, two years younger made Astoria a worse prospect than her sister Daphne. Whom Theo had *taken* to the Yule Ball. "Or it was just mistletoe. What's wrong, Striker?"

"No, it's just..." Hermione seemed to lose the battle with herself, and buried her face in his shoulder. "The way he *looked* at us, I don't... his eyes, even right after he'd been *kissing* someone- his eyes were just *dead*... I'm being silly. But- I just had this thought. That eyes like that would be capable of anything."

"Don't worry." Draco flicked at the H on her wrist. "You're not the one he'd be after."

"I'd rather he be after me than you!" Hermione said, whirling on him. "Don't make that face, I know you're better at dark magic, but I am learning- I'm *glad* I'm learning- and *I'm* cautious, but you, you can be so overconfident, and reckless- I just got this terrible feeling looking at him, I can't explain it..."

"He doesn't have the Dark Mark. I saw his left sleeve rolled up when- when he got it wet in Potions. I don't think it was a glamour hiding it either."

"You don't need the Dark Mark to hurt someone."

"And who did you learn that lesson from?"

Draco made faces, and went on about being the next great dark lord, until she was laughing and swatting at him again. He dreamed that night, though. He dreamed of Theo with bodies at his feet.

Theo stood before the statue of Salazar Slytherin without a drop of blood on him, handsome and pale and unworried with Luna underfoot, her skin alabaster-pale as her last time in the Chamber. This time, the life was already fully gone from her. Beside her, Neville was impaled, the Sword of Gryffindor clean through his chest, dead hand reaching helplessly in the direction of Luna's corpse.

Harry was limp and unmoving there too, emerald afterglow of the Killing curse still hanging around him, frozen. Hermione had her uniform torn down the front with her throat slit, the word Mudblood carved over her collarbone. Ron had poison leaking from his nose and ears and mouth and eyes, Blood Traitor carved on his sternum. Sirius was flickering in and out of reality, the snowdrop ring the only part fully there, gleaming with eerie mistiness in the blood-scented air. Remus's ring was near his, hands almost entwined, with Remus's face bitten off, like a werewolf had chewed it open. There was a dagger embedded in the corpse of Dobby, big cute marble eyes wide open and unseeing.

Severus's corpse was the closest to Theo's feet. It bore the mark of fangs. "You took my father from me," Theo said as Severus's dead eyes opened.

"Don't bury the body," Severus commanded. "Burn it."

Draco sat up screaming. It was good he cast Inmotus, or he would have woken the entire Ravenclaw dorm. He sat up in the blue color that should have been neutral, should have meant safety, and was no less within a nightmare. He could almost see the face of that stag mask above him still. *It was just a dream.* Or- *I'm going mad.*

Draco couldn't sleep, not for the rest of the night. He ended up paging over books on spell creation, thinking of Verniculpa with disgust. Psychological warfare? Try *actual* war.

He stared at his hands, thinking of them cursed with Verniculpa, but the image of his father's hand under Cauterizo was superimposed over it, as if the blood drawn out could be set on fire...

Blood to fire. Transmutation, difficult because of the proportion of blood that was water. Research for Verniculpa had taught that. But if hydrogen dioxide in the blood could be transmuted first, or just dried...

Fire in the blood.

Draco might not have learned any more about Eurydice, let alone himself. But he did have a curse he wanted to create.

Ron's dress robes were better than at the Yule Ball. Madam Malkin's had done what they could with a low budget. Draco had still been tempted to purchase Ron another set as an early Christmas present. Their respectable mid-range green clashed with Hermione's filmy fuchsia-purple. At least his distinctive red hair looked fetching rather than garish styled, a resemblance almost to Charlie the dragontamer tonight. That was the highest praise you could deliver any Weasley.

Hermione was all done up, bushy hair tamed with Sleek-Eazy. Her and Luna's ears and wrists and necks glistened with Black heirloom jewelry, with Draco's turquoise jewelry also in evidence. She was fidgety but glowing. Ron looked petrified, then soothed by Draco reminding him it was the first official date for Neville and Luna too.

The six made a striking group. They would have just from Harry's presence, in new dress robes in burgundy red and gold, rather like the robes Sirius had worn on the first day of his trial.

Harry might have brought someone a picture of Draco's design to have them made, but he hadn't succeeded looking like his godfather. Where Sirius had looked the rakish aesthete, scarlet-clad scoundrel with an Azkaban-lined but broodingly handsome face, Harry was ethereal, something close to the figure of a prince. Hermione had used Sleek-Eazy on his hair, smooth and swept off his face, not trying to hide the scar for once. She said it made him look more grown-up. And deep red made Harry's eyes look so green in contrast, it didn't seem he could be real. That was not even to speak of the way the robes fit his taut shoulders, narrow hips, the pale well-wrought body that Draco *knew* underneath...

Harry was a sight for sore eyes, but they remained sore, or at least uncertain. Draco had to shake the feeling of a funeral procession. If these halls fell like before, there would be dead bodies lining this corridor... bodies for graves, *more and more graves*...

Ginny came down with the Gryffindors to be their photographer. She took Draco's Polaroid camera and did a series of shots of the couples. She didn't seem to resent not being invited to the party. From an impatient Dean to the side, she and her boyfriend had plans of their own tonight.

The Lovegoods weren't exactly made of money. Luna had been happy to repurpose her robes from the Heart of Winter gala with tailoring charms. Draco tried to forget they had originally been Mother's. She was dazzling in layers of glistening, filmy white tulle, hair in a braided with a snowdrop flower crown Draco had ordered. Neville had nearly fallen down the stairs at seeing her.

Neville was wearing fashionable white dress robes to match, bought by his parents just for the occasion. Frank and Alice were making up for lost time spoiling their boy, and seemed to approve of Luna. He looked so muscular and handsome that Luna refused to let go of his arm all the way up the marble steps. Her other hand went to fuss with his supposedly messy dark hair, obviously just an excuse to touch it.

"Did you hear, there's supposed to be a vampire coming? It's a good thing Professor Lockhart can't come." Draco and Neville started laughing, faithful enough readers of the Quibbler to know Luna was speaking of Scrimgeour. Neither of them were convinced of Scrimgeour's dark secret. But if Mr. Lovegood published it, Luna tended to believe it. When they explained to the others, Hermione looked annoyed, but Ron distracted her with a whisper in her ear that had her giggling and rose-cheeked as they entered the party.

Draco had seen this shindig only from the outside in the blue loop. He'd been annoyed to be left out, but more annoyed to be caught at his business with the Room of Requirement. Severus had gotten him out of trouble. They'd argued, with Severus doubting his abilities, and Draco still too arrogant to admit how desperately he needed help. And he simply hadn't trusted Severus back then. Memories he was glad to overwrite, red blotting out the blue.

The distant sound of the party in full swing gave way to a merry furor of voices once they were inside. The voices quickly hit a lull at their arrival, though, heads turning to see Famous Harry Potter. Harry took Draco's arm, to make obvious who his date was.

The party's decorations were admittedly beautiful. Slughorn had obviously magically enlarged his office. But there were enough people to crowd the place to the rafters- in a way Slughorn had no doubt intended, to show off his reach. Draco's eyes began to inventory the people he knew and those he didn't, after his eyes first sought out Severus. So many people here who might see him slipping out before Veritaserum disappeared that night...

He could brew that himself. Except- there was Severus in a dark corner, making stilted small talk with Sprout and Flitwick, and looking to hold affection for nothing and no one in the world save the tumbler of brandy in hand. It was hard to think what the use of Veritaserum would be. Both Severus and Dumbledore were strong Occlumens...

"Draco?" Harry tugged on his arm. "Look, aren't the fairies beautiful? Are they real?" Slughorn had hung an expensive gold lamp over the proceedings. The sparkling of its fairies was pretty, but had nothing on Severus's Christmas enchantment of fireflies-

Would Severus be alive by next Christmas, to charm green fireflies about his tree? In two Christmases? Who in this room would be dead by *next* Christmas?

"Draco," Harry said again. Maybe he wanted help avoiding Slughorn, but it was too late. The head slug himself had spotted his guest of honor, and was weaving his convoluted way through, ready to show Harry off like a prize pig. Draco didn't stop the other couples from fleeing.

"Get out while you can," he whispered. Luna left sadly saying about how she wished there was dancing, Neville was *such* a good dancer...

They traded Luna for Slughorn, one of the most dismal phrases in the English language. Even on an etymological level.

"Harry, m'boy!" Slughorn exclaimed. "So many people I'd like you to meet!" He took the Harry's unoccupied arm and dragged him away. Draco was dragged along, with Harry keeping a stubborn hold on him.

"Let go, dragonslayer, go tend to your adoring public."

"You are *not* leaving me to this..."

"Schmoozing? I *would* assist, but I have an acute sense of aesthetics, and that velvet hat of Slughorn's has *tassels* on it... a man can only endure so much..."

"*You're* wearing velvet," Harry whispered, as an excuse to run his hands over the lush midnight blue lapels of Draco's embellished robes and cloak, custom-made with aviary and cage details in Ravenclaw bronze. Harry's fingers had been tracing the designs on the velvet brocade since the minute he saw him. They didn't stop even after Slughorn hauled them before some glasses-wearing intellectual and his starved pet vampire. Slughorn was just lucky Harry's hands were where he could see them, based on his track record.

"Harry, I'd like you to meet Eldred Worple, an old student of mine, author of *Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst the Vampires*- and, of course, his friend Sanguini."

No way a vampire's real name was *Sanguini.* Way too on-the-nose. Although it did have a similarity in sound to Seguinus- itself a not uncommon Catalan name, and probably not fake there, but this vampire...

At any rate, Draco hoped Lockhart's had been more charismatic. Surely a man who had once aspired to the lofty heights of Severus Snape could not have let his standards fall *this* low.

Slughorn was not introducing Draco. Either he wasn't eager to push a gay relationship into the face of traditional folk, or it was easy to miss anything, in the vicinity of the spectacle of Chosen One on promenade.

"Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!" Worple simpered. "I was saying to Professor Slughorn only the other day, where is the biography of Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?"

"Er. Were you?" Harry shot Draco a petrified glance, then a judgmental one, once he seemed to glean how much Draco was enjoying watching his torment.

"Just as modest as Horace described! But seriously-" The doddering academic persona dropped with amateurish abruptness. "I would be delighted to write it myself- people are craving to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in four- or five-hour sessions-"

"I think your vampire associate has found some more interesting friends," Draco drawled, jerking his head towards Sanguini, who had noticed a group of girls nearby, giggling curiously over him. "Perhaps he's also planning to *interview* them." Worple had to go get his pet in line, before returning undaunted. When Harry said he wasn't interested, he just kept pattering on about how much money Harry could make.

"Oh, I've got more than enough money for both of us, don't I, darling?" Draco purred, and pressed a kiss to Harry's ear. All three men looked scandalized, even the vampire. But Harry looked relieved, so Draco decided to carry on doing what he did best: making people

uncomfortable. "Sanguini, is it? I'm sure you're acquainted with the case of our former professor, Gilderoy Lockhart, and his... interchanges with Seguinus Sade. Vampire society *is* a small world... you wouldn't happen to *know* Sade, would you?" Sanguini had gone so pale, it was like he had turned back into a stationary corpse. "Or have you ever been to Castell de L'Infern? I'm told it has excellent *gargoyles*..."

Slughorn and friends let Harry and Draco move on after that.

"Don't get me wrong," Draco remarked. "You should be networking. But if you *want* me to clear the room, there's no one better at saying exactly the wrong thing..."

"I'm never going to anything like this without you again," Harry said reverently, and didn't stop Draco from picking up goblets for them both. Harry made a face at the mead, before taking on a more stilted expression. "Oh, hello, Professor Trelawney..."

Trelawney looked two sheets to the wind already. Good for her, the old coot. "Harry Potter! My dear boy! The rumors! The stories! The Chosen One! Of course, I have known for a very long time... the omens were never good, Harry... but why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance!"

Harry looked like he would have preferred the vampire. "Indeed," Draco said smoothly, "Divination is a *very* important subject, Professor. It's such a pity *I'm* not allowed to take it..."

"Draco Malfoy!" Trelawney jerked back, nearly upsetting the table. She looked to regret every life choice that had led her to this party, however delicious the mead. "You are-"

"Draco Black. That's his name. Draco Lupin Black."

"Do you remember, Professor Trelawney, when I saw an alligator in my tea cup in third year? If you would let me into the Divination Tower once, for a consultation..."

Poor drunken Trelawney didn't bother saying goodbye. She just seized the side of the table, letting out a furious hiccup, and ran for the hills, a blur of stumbling paisley fabric that left bemused partygoers in her wake.

"Can't take credit for that one. It helps when the other person is already terrified of you."

"So that's your secret." Harry led him away from the adult refreshments, lest Draco get too soused to relieve him from unwanted social situations.

"Let them hate, as long as they fear," Draco agreed, only for Harry to look up and grin.

"Mistletoe!"

Draco was happy to seize that gorgeous face and kiss it. Even in a sea of the best and brightest of the wizarding world.

Look at him. He's like no one else in the world, he'll be the greatest wizard that ever lived. You all want a piece of him, but he's mine, look how much he's mine...

Eventually, they had to detach, though Draco's mind had gone to ungodly places. It only left them when their circuit of the room had them stumbling upon the man of the hour, the purported second vampire. With Scrimgeour's ungracefully graying hair, black robes, scars, limp, and the dour look about him, it would be hard to imagine a vampire would *want* to sire him. But there had to be blind vampires out there somewhere. He'd ask Lockhart...

This man was not just a punchline. He was in power, at least until Voldemort had his way with him. Draco was tempted to ask if he'd met Sanguini, the only other individual of his kind at the party. But here was one person he could not carelessly offend. Back to good behavior.

"Harry Potter. I've wanted to meet you for a very long time. Do you know that?" Scrimgeour said warmly.

It was not the best approach. Harry seemed fed up with people acting like Draco wasn't even there. "No," said Harry, and glanced at Draco. Either Scrimgeour couldn't catch the hint, or else didn't care.

"Oh yes, for a very long time. But Dumbledore has been protective of you," Scrimgeour said. He lowered his voice, pulling Harry behind some tables of food. House elves were coming and going there, but like most wizards, Scrimgeour seemed to disregard their presence as a factor. "Natural, of course, natural, after what you've been through... especially what happened at the Ministry..."

There was an anxious energy to him, as if it took nerve for the Minister of Magic to speak to a sixth-year. "I have been hoping for an occasion to talk to you ever since I gained office, but Dumbledore has- most understandably, as I say- prevented this."

Harry's face creased at the implied imputation against Dumbledore. He nudged Draco, looking put-upon by Draco's lack of interference. Draco obliged as mildly as he could. *Don't make an enemy of this minister. No stealing proverbial pocket watches this time.* "He can't have tried *too* hard," Draco drawled in a light tone, "If he let you come to a party at Hogwarts."

Scrimgeour looked over with a start. "Oh, Mr. Malfoy, a pleasure to meet you as well-"

"His name," Harry said through gritted teeth, "Is Draco *Black*."

Scrimgeour looked none too happy to have to deal with Draco, either Malfoy or Black. "Oh, yes, of course. My apologies. Mr. Black, if you wouldn't mind... Harry and I have a great deal to discuss..." Draco would have obeyed the dismissal, if Harry hadn't kept him there, hand going to clasp him around the waist under the cloak.

"Anything you say, I'll just tell Draco anyway. He's my boyfriend, did you know that?"

"Oh, yes, of course, we all read the Daily Prophet... you are a lucky man, Mr. Ma- Mr. Black, I can tell you that. Although Harry, you are very lucky as well. Your, er, fellow is a top academic achiever, is he not? Dolores Umbridge tells me, Mr. Black, that you received the highest grade in *all* of her Defense classes." *Only because she took a grade off each of*

Hermione's by default for being Muggleborn. "And she tells me, Harry, that you wish to become an Auror..."

"Umbridge still works at the Ministry?" Harry said warily. Scrimgeour had unerringly hit on absolutely the worst acquaintance they could have in common.

"She did express," Scrimgeour said in a lower tone, "That you had a... difficult relationship with authority. Understandably, but... I do hope you have matured since then. All we want is to help you."

Harry opened and closed his mouth, looking stunned, and Draco's resolve to play possum broke down. He would be diplomatic, he swore to himself, he would, but he couldn't not defend *Harry.* "You spoke of what Harry went through last summer," Draco said levelly, trying to stick to objective facts. "On the summer solstice? He was fifteen at the time. It was his godfather's wedding night, and he came very close to dying. Closer than he would have, if the Ministry had not placed at Hogwarts a Defense professor who did not believe in teaching or practicing defensive spells. It was fortunate he'd had the maturity to learn them himself."

"Yes, those were confusing times for everyone," Scrimgeour said, floundering. "Mistakes were made to be sure, on both sides..."

"You should dismiss Umbridge from the Ministry," Harry blurted, eyes blazing. "Whatever you want from me, it doesn't mean much if that's who you're taking your opinions on Hogwarts from."

"Mr. Potter," Scrimgeour said, facade of paternal helpfulness falling. "This spite is extraordinary. Try and control your temper-"

"I would hope Harry might be forgiven some strong opinions on the matter." Draco entwined his fingers with Harry's, keeping his tone affable. "Given Professor Umbridge's strong opinions on him. In her first class as his professor, when he tried to tell the truth- that *Voldemort has returned*, and students needed to learn to defend themselves- she called him a liar. She was quite unequivocal on that point. She never wavered. If Umbridge had her way, and Harry had no *strong opinions* of his own, this conversation would be with a tombstone. I suppose a tombstone *would* be more acquiescent."

"Of course there have been mistakes in the past... but the Ministry is striving now to offer every assistance possible to the war effort... Gilderoy Lockhart, for instance. I gave the executive order to try him privately, and remand him to the custody of Albus Dumbledore and Sirius Black. That was a personal favor to your friend Mr. Black..."

"After the press coverage," Harry said darkly, "Turned public opinion against punishing treatment of Lockhart. You just passed responsibility off to someone else. Don't act like Draco owes you. If the public wasn't sympathetic, you wouldn't have been so *charitable*-"

"*Harry*," Draco hissed, taking his hand to keep him restrained. Then he turned to Scrimgeour with a more unshakably pleasant facade. "I am grateful, Minister, to be sure. In the exact proportion to which I should be grateful."

Scrimgeour's face had gradually gone paler and paler, until he did rather look like a vampire. "Well. It has been a pleasure meeting you both. Perhaps we will speak again, Harry, at another time, when you are not..." He seemed to struggle to find a euphemism for *when your awful boyfriend has kindly fucked off.* "When you are not occupied. Goodnight." And he beat a hasty retreat.

Harry seized Draco's hand and pulled it to his mouth and kissed it. "You are so terrifying," Harry said reverently. "You being nice is almost scarier than you being mean. I half-expected shadow to start coming out of your fingers again."

"Who's to say there isn't?" Draco said softly, caressing Harry's lips. "Right from my fingertips. Go on, then, Chosen One. Give a kiss to the shadow."

"How can you say crazy things like that," Harry marveled, "And somehow it sounds..."

"Not half as sociopathic as it should?"

"*Hot*," Harry whispered, biting his lip.

Harry was giving Draco's hand another reverent kiss when Hermione cleared her throat near them. "If you're quite done terrorizing the leader of the wizarding world, there's someone Professor Flitwick wants you to meet."

"You mean Harry," Draco said absently, staring at Harry's mouth.

"No, I mean Draco." Hermione gave Harry an apologetic look. "Come on."

Harry stayed at his side, as Draco was showed around as Flitwick's prize student, to any number of notable Ravenclaw attendees. Flitwick was not subtle, giving broad hints that Draco was not only a Ravenclaw- he certainly had dressed the part- but perhaps the most brilliant student he had ever taught. Save, of course, for the other Ravenclaw he was currently addressing. Draco was as yet undecided on his future career path, Flitwick hinted, so if they wanted to talk a bit about *their* profession... they would be lucky to employ Draco, had they heard he got twelve OWLs, *all Os*...

It seemed to make Flitwick happy, even if half the people just wanted to ask Draco about Harry Potter. McGonagall was looking over, also gratified, and even Severus cast a not wholly critical glance, when Draco was introduced to the current head of St. Mungo's. Draco put on a good face for these well-meaning adults, even if pretending to so much as consider the idea of becoming a Healer made him want to brag about his superlative capabilities in the field of destruction.

Harry divided most of his time between bragging about Draco to anyone who would listen, and stubbornly resisting attempts to part them, including by Slughorn, who seemed to have recovered his nerve to use Harry as a conversation piece. The night went on with Harry's grip a comforting constant. Even if constant physical contact, along with the number of goblets of mead Draco had consumed almost without noticing, had him a hair's breadth from declaring to the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation that his only real ambition in life was to lose his virginity to Harry Potter.

At least they got the chance to hobnob with Shacklebolt, the only real Minister of Magic in the room. Draco was not about to waste that foreknowledge by not giving him his due attention. Even if he hadn't been destined for prominence, though, Shacklebolt had fought to protect Draco and his friends at the Citadelle Xaphan and the Ministry of Magic, and facilitated the deal for Lockhart, much more than Scrimgeour. So Draco was friendly and respectful, which had the unfortunate effect of making them think Draco was far, far more enthusiastic about the prospect of following in Shacklebolt's footsteps than he actually was.

"Did you know Draco can cast Protego Diabolica?" Harry enthused. "He did it to protect us at the Department of Mysteries from Voldemort..."

Trust Harry Potter, with his supreme faith in the goodness of all, to go on starry-eyed about dark magic Draco could perform, to the *Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement*. "Yeah," Draco said uncomfortably, "And Voldemort broke the protective circle with one spell, I don't even know how, so it's not actually much to write home about..."

"I do not need to be told," Shacklebolt said warmly, "How talented a wizard Draco is. As are you, Harry. You both take after your godfathers. And if I needed a reminder, Draco, Filius and Minerva have both been eloquent about your extraordinary capabilities in practical magic. Did you know that Minerva McGonagall is of the opinion that you both would make fine Aurors?"

Harry looked so excited, Draco could see him forming dreams of them fighting evil together forever. *Gag* him. "For me, the temperament requirement, sir..."

"Temperament changes," Shacklebolt said evenly, "As we mature, and as our circumstances change." As if Draco's circumstances had been extraordinarily difficult, and mitigated any reproaches Draco could cast on himself. Draco could not get out of this conversation fast enough. "But from what I have observed, you do have a considerable instinct to protect others. That lies at the heart of the Auror's mission. And it can't be taught."

It was a relief, then, selfish as it was, to have Ron do his Ronald Weasley thing and become enough of an impediment, the world could no longer function around him. "Harry," Neville said, appearing with an anxious look. "Harry, listen- oh, Mr. Shacklebolt, Draco, I'm sorry to interrupt, but it's Ron- he, er-" Neville faltered. He didn't seem to want to say anything incriminating, in front of a man who regularly consumed Molly Weasley's meatballs. But a green-faced Ron, hanging over a massive potted Poinsettia, as if trying to reckon whether it would be a good place to spew? That told the whole story.

"Good to see you boys as always," Shacklebolt said with a wry nod, and went off to speak to the amorous-looking Sanguini. That was one threat to the safety of the party attended to, and left them to attend to the other major one: Ron's superlative drunkenness.

"It's not his fault," Hermione said, following them with a furious look on her face. "He got into that Basilisk Brew concoction Parkinson was spreading around. I spoke to Zabini- we exchanged some rather frank remarks- and he claims he didn't put anything special in the batch Ron picked up. There's just absinthe in *all* of it!"

"Oh, yes, Basilisk Brew is delicious," Luna said happily. She tried to support Ron, before he doubled over and puked all over the floor outside Slughorn's office. "Don't feel bad, Ron, I almost had that reaction too. And I only had half a cup..."

"I don't know how Zabini and Parkinson were just drinking cup after cup and were fine!" Hermione said almost tearfully. Ron's continued vomiting just made her bend down beside him, and rub his back. That did look like true love.

"He'd had a lot of mead first, I think," Neville said, wilting under Hermione's glare. "He really was nervous about your first date. I don't think he knew how drunk he was getting, and then this Slytherin drink..."

"I accused Zabini of spiking Ron's with something extra," Hermione said grimly. "He denied it, but then he said, and I quote, 'You say that like it would be the worst thing one of our friends has done to the other's.'"

Millie's warnings flitted through Draco's head all at once. At least Ron distracted them, stammering, "Sorry, 'Mione... 'm not drunk, though, swear I'm not drunk..." He continued this premise even between bouts of vomiting.

Hermione, Luna, and Draco were left dateless, as the Blunderbusses were occupied taking Ron back to the boys' dorm. Hermione wanted to stay by Ron's side. An apologetic Ron groaned he didn't want to ruin the party for her, and she shouldn't go to the boy's dorms anyway. Unspoken was his clear desire for Hermione not to see him like this, more than she had already.

Hermione let him go reluctantly, but Draco was drunk enough to whine at the loss of Harry. "Can you come back," Draco whined, audible and not caring, "Wanna go to the Room of Requirement." Harry, who had barely had a drop of alcohol, just kissed Draco on the cheek.

"I've got to look after Ron, but we're both going back to Grimmauld tomorrow, remember?"

"Ooh," Luna said with a grin, "Ooh ooh, we all know what that means."

"Do we?" said Neville, and Luna promised to explain it later. She waved goodbye until they were out of sight, and then Hermione turned to her with a quizzical look.

"Why *does* he want to go to the Room of Requirement with Harry?"

Luna cracked up, her light giggle filling the corridors as they escorted Hermione up towards Gryffindor. Eventually, Draco explained in the most euphemistic terms possible. Hermione's ears still went red, especially after Luna made an indiscreet remark, about how Hermione might wish to use the room with Ron before long. At least Ron's drunkenness didn't seem to have disillusioned Hermione enough to flatly disavow the prospect.

"It's also called the Room of Hidden Things." Draco grabbed onto the wall as the mead hit with a belated strength. "Stands to reason that's where *hidden things* should take place-"

"I can't believe we thought *you* had conjured that room," Hermione said, only to grab onto the wall as well. "Oh, God!"

"Striker?" Luna said, poking her in the side. "I thought you weren't drinking tonight. Is it that awful, to think about Harry and Draco copulating? I find it invigorating, personally-"

That thankfully never had to be unpacked, as Hermione breathed, "The Room of *Hidden Things*. Oh, it's too obvious. It couldn't possibly be so easy... Draco, you really think the Mirror of Erised is tied to the Deathly Hallows? Listen, what if after he was done using it to hide the Philosopher's Stone... what if Dumbledore put the Mirror of Erised in the Room of Requirement?"

Hermione was right. They'd already been high in the castle, and it wasn't hard to convince a tipsy Draco and Luna they should swing by the seventh floor. They'd be leaving tomorrow, and the thought of finding the Mirror of Erised would obsess Draco's sober self, if he had to wait until the end of winter break to look. So they followed, Luna singing Expecting your Patronum in a lovely soprano- not the stealthiest of enterprises- and Hermione paced before the entrance. When the door opened, they came out into that cavernous room of forgotten things where Draco had destroyed the vanishing cabinet. The Mirror of Erised loomed near the entrance, under a ceiling that made even this massive mirror look small.

"Is that it?" Hermione asked. There were no marks of any damage on it. "It's beautiful, the wrought gold... there's the inscription you told us about. *I show not your face, but your heart's desire.*"

Approaching gave Draco déjà vu, not of first-year but of a different mirror that proceeded it. He pushed it away, relying on liquid courage. "Come here, Striker. Luna, you can have a turn later if you want. But I need to make sure I remember right about the symbol."

Luna nodded, perching on one of the many wooden crates nearby, in her shimmering robes and snowdrop crown. Draco approached the mirror with Hermione. He smiled helplessly at the sight of Harry. It was Harry more recently: tonight, in fact.

"Oh," Hermione said, starting back. "It's... that's what I most desire?"

"It's not what you'd think? You don't have to tell us what you see..."

"She does, though," Luna called. "We all know you see Harry, Draco, so it's only fair..."

"It's Voldemort dead," Hermione said, with a shaky smile on her face. "He's right there, like in the Department of Mysteries, but he's just dead, on the ground like he's asleep. We're standing over him. Us, Harry, Ron, Neville, Ginny. We're not hurt. Ron... Ron has his arm around me. We're all alive. It's over." She seemed to struggle with the weight of her desire. "Maybe it's not good want someone dead so much, even if it is Voldemort... but Draco, Luna, you're *here*, you survived the war..."

Draco hugged her from behind, wishing he could see. "Will you try touching your wand between the words? That's what made me think this was tied to my wand, that it worked for me but not Ron..."

"And Hermione thought," Luna said helpfully, "Ron just wasn't a strong enough wizard. But you're definitely strong enough, Hermione, so if it doesn't show up for you, we'll know it has to do with Draco..."

"Okay." Hermione pressed her wand between the letters, one by one. Nothing happened. "Should I be doing some spell?"

"No." Draco's heart beat faster. "Here, let me." He let her go and she stepped aside. He stared at Harry, unable to resist the urge to look longer, before he pulled out the talon wand-

"Wait," Hermione said. "Are you carrying your mother's wand? Try that first. If that works, we'll know it's probably to do with you, not your wand."

The gloom of the room, the terrible things Draco had seen and done here, were present once Draco took out his mother's wand. He looked backwards, reassuring himself there was no one else there to see this wand he had stolen. There was only his princesses, lovely and trusting.

"Okay." Draco tapped his mother's wand. The symbol of the Hallows appeared. Slowly, out-of-body, he watched it do the same each time. Hermione came closer.

"It's just the line lit up, as you said. The Elder Wand, that's the part of the symbol it means. It would make sense for it to be tied to it." Had she somehow figured out Dumbledore had the Elder Wand without his help? He wouldn't put it past her-

"Think about it," she said, flushing at Luna and Draco's blank looks. "The Elder Wand is supposed to make the wielder all-powerful. That's kind of what this mirror does, *virtually* speaking. It gives you everything you want. The omnipotence of wishing. It changes reality to be what you wish it was. It's the power to make your desire real. Or at least... *seem* real. It's like... like what the Elder Wand is *supposed* to be, if you could step inside the mirror..."

Draco's hands shook and he dropped his mother's wand, while Luna slid off her box. "I want to see in the mirror," she demanded. With an indulgent sigh, Hermione let Luna run forward. She offered Draco a hand up, and he leaned against her shoulder, watching Luna.

Luna was giggling as she planted herself in front of it, but she was not laughing for long. "No," she breathed, "No," and Draco wondered if she was seeing her dead mother. He didn't think she was so in love with Neville yet to see him. He'd expected similar to Hermione, or herself as the successful editor of the Quibbler someday, or something of the like. But Luna looked much as she had faced with her Boggart. Her hands gripped the gilt edges of the mirror. "No, no, no..."

"Luna," Draco said, coming forward. He took her hand by peeling one off the mirror. "What's wrong? What do you see?"

Tears began to run silently down Luna's face. She pulled her hand from his to cover her face. To hide the tears, and to hide her eyes from the mirror. "No, it's not. That can't be what I want..."

"Luna!" Hermione hugged her, pulling them out of reach of the glowing mirror, its set of Elder Wand lines still alight. "Calm down, it's okay, we're here..."

"No," Luna gasped, and buried her face in Hermione's hair. Hermione shot Draco a look over Luna's shoulder. He wondered if Hermione was thinking what he was. In that moment, he wished he had never gone back in time, if this was what he had done to Luna.

Luna cried for some time, but gave no indication whether Draco's awful suspicion was true. Eventually, it got late enough they had to take her back to Ravenclaw. When Draco stepped up to the knocker, it had one of its pointed riddles, but it was one even his tipsy mind could decipher.

"Who is the one foe no man can escape?"

"His shadow."

Draco's answer made Luna cry harder. Thankfully, the common room was empty. Luna headed towards her dorm, and they followed. "Wait, Hermione, you're not a Ravenclaw."

"I've been up there before. I'll stay the night if she wants. But Draco, you're a boy, *you* can't go..."

It would have been colossally selfish, to demand Luna stay where anyone could happen upon her breakdown, simply because her cousin wanted to be the one to comfort her. He could entrust Luna to her, but he still drew Hermione aside. "Don't... Hermione, don't ask her what she saw in the mirror. And if she says- no matter what it is, Hermione, she can't *control* it, don't judge her..."

"You think she saw something with Tom Riddle... I won't say a word. And I'll look after her, I promise."

Draco hugged Hermione, then went over and hugged Luna so tightly she had to call for him to stop. "I love you, Draco," she said sadly, wiping at her face. Draco said he loved her too, and watched Hermione take her up the stairs, Luna's weight falling against her as they went.

They were lucky Luna hadn't emulated Draco enough to try and destroy the mirror.

It had Draco furious, his impotence at seeing Luna so upset. Luckily, the other Ravenclaw boys were fast asleep. No one could catch Draco taking two bottles of Firewhisky from under Tony's bed. He wasn't going to drink much, he told himself, but that didn't explain why he took both. And he would replace them- though even if he knew it was Draco, Tony would be too afraid to bring him to task for it...

The Room of Requirement let him in with his bottles, the Mirror unrepentant for the damage it had done. "I really hate you," Draco said, but sat on the ground before it. It was easy to

drink straight from the bottle. Especially with Harry before him, Avada Kedavra gaze never leaving him once.

Draco never knew quite how it happened, save that he had consumed nearly an entire bottle, and he was upset about Luna being upset, and it must have seemed like a good idea at the time. All he knew was that he ended up getting drunk enough to write the word THIEF over his left palm like from third year. It seemed imperative that Mirror Harry be shown Draco's true nature.

"See, Harry, that's me, your dragon. If we're going... going to go all the way, you should know... know what you're going to be giving yourself to. I'll be stealing you too..." Because Draco *was* what Luna must fear herself to be. The darkness that had touched him had marked him too indelibly to ever get out of his head. A formless shadow monster lived in Draco's brain, creeping out at his fingertips, bleeding out in the black ink over his hand that said THIEF.

The ink didn't stay on the mirror, which was no longer glowing with the symbols of the Hallows. Draco didn't try to reactivate them, just sully the inscription, but the black left it right away, while both of his palms ended up ink-black, like he'd cast Verniculpa and it had gone wrong.

And those were the hands that stole the Mirror of Erised.

Maybe it was just childish defiance. Dumbledore thought he could leave Draco in the dark? Draco would take any light he could. Or maybe he just wanted to always have Harry to look at like this. But whatever it was, it added up in Draco's mind into, *I'm kidnapping Harry Potter*.

His addled mind produced where he could hide his stolen goods, and it would be better than Grimmauld. He laughed manically at the image as he began his work, casting enough Featherlight charms on the mirror to lighten it. Using the talon wand in one hand and his mother's wand in his right seemed to help. His levitation attempts dragged the feet over the floor. Not that he knew where he was going, or how he would get it down the Honeydukes passage to Apparate it out. But his repeated thought, *I need a way to get this out of Hogwarts,* yielded unexpected dividends. The room really could deliver up anything you required, other than Vince's corpse.

There was a passage. It was steep enough to remind Draco of the drop into the Chamber of Secrets. Eventually, there were steps. By the time he made it out, he was more falling down than walking. The mirror had to go sideways behind him, prodding into his back like a battering ram. He staggered and hurtled clear down the last set of stairs, mirror just missing him as they fell into... a sitting room.

A very poor sitting room, carpet stringy and unwelcomingly rough against his face. He hauled himself up, only to see the blasted mirror had somehow landed standing. It looked none the worse the wear for its transit. Over a small fireplace, there was painting of a girl beside a tunnel, who had a sweetness to her face that reminded him of Luna. But she had

darker hair, and looked even younger, and far more dreamy and vacant. As he stared, the tunnel began to disappear. He pocketed the wands, only to hear a Christmas song.

"Stille Nacht... heilige Nacht. Alles schläft... einsam wacht," a warbling voice sang, footsteps sounding as inebriated as Draco's. "Nur das traute hochheilige- hochheilige Paar," the man sang in accented German, stumbling over the words. He wandered in, carrying a near-emptied bottle of whisky. From the look of the man, it hadn't been his first, spectacles dirty and his gray hair even filthier. His right hand held his wand, but even an intruder and a great tall mirror threatening the paint on his ceiling did not make him brandish it. Incredibly, he put his wand *away.*

"What in the name of goats are you doing in my house?"

Draco could only laugh shakily. The Room of Requirement had a keen sense of humor, to take him right to the man he was in the process of robbing.

"Sorry... sorry, Dumbledore. Think I've had, er, too many. I can explain, about the, uh-" He jerked his thumb towards the mirror, whose name he couldn't remember. "Shiny thing," he said. He held up his ink-black left palm to show the THIEF brand in explanation, before he remembered the ink had smeared. Dumbledore's eyes were on his initials necklace instead, like it proved something.

"We've met before. You gave quite a speech." Dumbledore seemed to recover from drunkenness more rapidly than Draco, or at least to have more practice keeping his wits about him in this state.

Those keen blue eyes were unmistakable. "You were singing... Silent Night, but... in German. Why... you're not German..."

"There was someone who liked to sing Christmas songs at all times of year. And we knew someone once," Dumbledore said, voice unnaturally gruff and rough, "Who made a big stink how awful the translations were. Only the original would do. The singer took a fancy to the original German, made us all learn it. Suppose it's stuck with me." He sounded oddly embarrassed at this incredibly boring factoid. Draco just wanted to know how many points the headmaster would take from Ravenclaw.

"Grindelwald, right?" Draco slurred, and Dumbledore looked so stricken at the casual show of knowledge, he had to show his allegiance. For some reason, his mind decided the best way to do so would be singing. "Stille Nacht," he warbled agreeably. "Heilige Nacht..." But he trailed off at the sight of Dumbledore going forward, examining the mirror. He stood there for some time. Draco let his head loll forward, the weight such that he nearly fell asleep, before Dumbledore was shaking his shoulders.

"What is this mirror, Black? What does it do? Does it show the past?" Dumbledore sounded frantic, notes of drunkenness nearly gone.

"You should know, it's your mirror..." Draco rubbed his eyes and peered up. The resemblance had fooled him, but this wasn't *Albus* Dumbledore, though he'd not been wrong to answer to the Dumbledore name. "Or, wait... am I at the Hog's Head? *Aberforth Dumbledore.* It's a

magic mirror, shows what you desire most... needed to get it out of Hogwarts... you're about to turn me in to your brother, aren't you?"

Aberforth looked like he had seen a ghost. "What you most *desire*?"

"Shows me Harry Potter," Draco slurred. "My boyfriend. He's, like, *really* hot..."

"Why do you need to get this out of Hogwarts?" Aberforth asked intently, shaking his shoulder again. "Is this Order business, boy? Look at me! Why would I turn you in to *him*?"

There was enough viciousness in that last syllable that Draco took a mad chance. "This is a mirror. It's Dumbledore's. Er. Headmaster Dumbledore. This *is* his mirror. Definitely. No... no doubt about that. But I. I want it to be *my* mirror. So..."

"You're robbing my brother," Aberforth surmised, before leaning forward with a gleam in his bright blue eyes. "How can I help?"

Unhealed Scars

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Fixed a mistake last chapter, sorry! :)

Anyway, thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments so far, they're a great present! Happy Holidays! And to everyone who celebrates it, Merry Christmas! I am having a great Christmas! I hope you all have a wonderful day too! ^^

Playlist

"Finite temulentia!"

The advantage to Aberforth's sobering charm was that it made the creation of a Portkey far less hazardous for Draco. The disadvantage was that it made Draco's mind clear enough to think for the first time, *Why exactly am I stealing the Mirror of Erised again?*

"Portus," Draco intoned, focusing on the small goblet that Aberforth had gotten to make into a Portkey. He had doubted Draco's ability to Apparate with a powerful magical artifact. Meanwhile, he had taken Draco's admission he could illegally create Portkeys without blinking.

Draco did have to focus, irrational paranoia making him using his mother's wand, lest Aberforth recognize the talon wand and decide not to help him. He wasn't thinking, but it worked, as it had before, with no one thinking twice of it...

Since when does the talon wand let me use other wands?

Did that mean there truly was something of Aunt Bella left in it, to show clemency for her sister's wand?

He felt at the talon wand. The bend wasn't even *hot.*

Just something else he didn't understand.

Along with why Aberforth Dumbledore was being more loyal to a stranger than his own brother. His very famous, powerful brother. "Um, sir," Draco said, and earned a snort, showing how rarely Aberforth must hear *sir* applied to him. "Is there, er, a reason you're helping me?"

"Why are you stealing this thing from Albus, boy?"

Draco told the truth, albeit pruned to serve his interests. "There's an importance to this mirror," he said, sobriety not ending the whirling in his head. "An importance... it's something that the headmaster refuses to tell me. Or Harry Potter, and everyone else," *except maybe my godfather,* "For his own reasons. He said it was for my own good, but..."

Aberforth looked away, an unaccountable agitation coming to his twitching lined hands. "He always thinks that. Like he's some kind of god. But Albus... Albus doesn't know what's best for anyone. Go on, Black. Go get this contraband out of my damn house."

Draco understood very little indeed. But at least he had the comfort of knowing he understood more than Gilderoy Lockhart.

When the world stopped churning, the dark towers of Citadelle Xaphan rose above his head in bright sea-scented moonlight. He and the mirror had landed at the front of the castle, around where the wedding party had been. It left him exposed, with the moon so bright over the island-

Full. No, not just bright, full. Sirius and Remus wouldn't be here tonight for sure. His luck had held. "Yes," Draco hissed, "Yes! Sonorus! Lockhart! LOCKHART!" He waited, checked his watch, and decided to wait, lest he put a waking Lockhart in too bad a mood. The next step was to cast Focillo about fifteen times. It was *freezing* here.

He took the time to survey what had become of the place. Last time, it had been coming apart, the waking knights and gargoyles triggering the collapse of so many stones over him and Harry, from the figure he'd thought was Aunt Bella on that one remaining tall true tower. Now there were more towers, looming up like sentinels, the jutting shapes of gargoyles' wings at their heights a cut like tree branches high across moonlight, except there were no bellows in their hands. Draco walked in past the drawbridge, which had been left down. The front courtyard was full of discarded bellows, gleaming like a Gringotts vault full of silver. They were piled together as if waiting to be withdrawn, to pay some arcane price. When Draco tired from that short additional effort levitating the mirror, setting it down, the moonlight washed out the difference between gold and silver.

But for the bellows, it would have been like going back in time, if not to centuries ago- there was still piles of rubble visible even in the night, which shaded over flaws- but to the way it had been *before* Mother arrived. In his short time, Lockhart had done enough to repair that much. Although it was tempting to ascribe such impressive results to Sirius and Remus, who'd been working at it since the summer, and projected far more general competence.

He didn't need Lockhart to be a genuinely good builder, though. Not any more than was necessary to keep Sirius from tiring of him, and sending him back to Dumbledore. What Draco needed was for the disgraced fraud to be good at following orders. Orders which, if Lockhart seemed recalcitrant, there would be ways to twist, to make it seem the Unbreakable Vow would enforce them against him.

"Mr. Black!" Lockhart called, running into the courtyard in his pajamas and dressing gown. He had come to the citadel with nothing more than the clothes on his back, but Remus had obviously been generous with the once-peacock, accoutering him in fine warm nightclothes of thick black. His blond hair shone in the moonlight, a true burnished gold that was the one

thing not faked about the celebrity, longer, and wilder when woken from slumber. He looked half-awake. The fact that he did not stumble seemed attributable only to the repair on the cobblestone beneath their feet.

"Please, call me Draco." Draco injected warmth into his voice, but not too much. Lockhart had been unbelievably susceptible to manipulation in second year, but Draco was not about to behave as if four years in captivity under Sade left Lockhart unchanged. Even if many others- even Severus- seemed liable to make that mistake. "I'm sorry to wake you. But I didn't have anywhere else to turn." He put the slightest quiver into his voice, exaggerating his real exhaustion. "And you wrote in your letter that if I ever needed a favor..."

"Are you alright?" Lockhart exclaimed, running over between the bellows and drawing his wand. "Are you in danger?"

Yes, it was late and Lockhart had just woken, and the Mirror of Erised did blend *slightly* into the metallic sheen of these bellows in the dark. But Lockhart's observational capabilities were still alarmingly sub-par, for someone to whom they were entrusting the structural integrity of a *castle.*

"No, of course not, Lockhart, I wouldn't bring danger to your door-"

"Call me Gilderoy! Or Gil!" Lockhart exclaimed, seizing Draco's sleeve plaintively. It was startling to see they were about the same height. Draco must look like a grown man to Lockhart, almost a peer, if not in truth a superior. "If I'm to call you Draco..."

"Alright, Gilderoy," Draco said evenly, not resisting a natural step towards the appearance of greater closeness. That would provide an additional compulsion towards obedience for Lockhart, apart from the magical and hierarchical. No, *Gilderoy*, he had to try and think of him as that. *The things I do for the greater good of wizardkind.* "Haven't you noticed? I've brought you something!"

"Oh! Is it a Christmas present?"

Bloody hell. It was close enough to Christmas Day that he couldn't blame Gilderoy for his mind going there. But now he would have to produce a real present for this pushy criminal at some point, as not to leave him comically dejected. No one else would be giving Lockhart presents, that was for sure.

"Of a sort. But it will have to stay hidden, Gilderoy, and *covered*. No one can see it's here. This is a big enough place. I need you to find me somewhere good to hide this, somewhere Sirius and Remus would never look. And *you* have to promise not to look at-"

"Oh, it's Severus!" Gilderoy exclaimed, never one to pass up the chance to look in a mirror. Some characteristics were so inherent to his personality, no amount of deprivation could strip them away. "There he is! In his chambers at Hogwarts! He's put up the tapestry I gave him. What a wonderful mirror! He is, er, my liaison to you... it a portal? Some kind of communication device?"

Gilderoy seemed to have rebounded admirably in his new circumstances, with the optimistic tone of his letters borne out by his demeanor. The reminder of his affections for Severus, though, felt almost cruel, with the impossibility of reciprocation. "Operculum," Draco cast, conjuring a long black drape, and covered the bulk of the mirror with it. "Spelunca secure. Cave inificum."

"Oh," Gilderoy said, looking disappointed. "Am I only to use this to speak to him? Will he no longer visit?"

He obeyed Draco's instructions to help him levitate it, at which he proved surprisingly useful. He spoke happily of how much practice he'd had at the like, moving heavier stones at the Castell de L'Infern, and at a higher altitude which made it far more difficult.

"Child's play, really," Gilderoy boasted in the same tones as second year, although there might be more veracity to this showboating. His mood seemed to have skyrocketed at the sight of Severus. Draco dreaded bringing him back to earth.

Their surprisingly short trip over what had once been swamp and broken stone, now turned to grass and cobblestone, ended at a familiar place. Gilderoy proved able to carry the mirror with his own magic, and only brought it down when he saw Draco not following. "Is something wrong?" Gilderoy peered up at the looming shape of the library tower, unsuspecting. "This is the most intact tower. Your kind guardians have allowed me to live here."

If Gilderoy hadn't heard of what Draco had done on this tower, Draco would not be the one to tell him. He offered no further assistance moving the mirror, chest so tightened it was all he could do to move his own body. He kept willing Gilderoy to look away, so he could drink some draught of peace. "Just think it's too narrow to fit this inside, right?"

"Oh, no, watch!" Gilderoy beamed. "Prorogolocus!" he cast, and somehow, incredibly, one of his nonsensical-sounding spells worked. If Draco hadn't been busy trying not to lose his shit over where they were, he'd have to be objectively terrified, at the prospect of the terror unleashed on the world: *a competent Gilderoy Lockhart.*

Said competence allowed him to levitate the mirror in seemingly through the walls, while Draco drank his draught. The edges simply faded like ghost edges, where they would have collided with the stone otherwise. Rather than going right up the bookcase-lined stairs as in Draco's last visit, they descended a flight into the wider base of the tower, a much broader room lined with bookcases. These were largely emptied, only a few less moldering-looking tomes remaining. The rest of the storage space was occupied with a legion of candles, and what earthly possessions remained to Gilderoy. Otherwise, he had a large, comfortable-looking black double bed, a plain hardwood chest, a small wooden table with two wooden chairs, a smattering of blue pillows strewn over the furniture, and naturally, a plain wall-high mirror, with no few candles hovering in the air over it.

Gilderoy levitated the Mirror of Erised through the furniture and candles, then gestured for Draco to move the other mirror aside. "Tap the wall seven times with your wand," Gilderoy instructed, "And say 'Toujours pur'." Draco did, only to step back in alarm when a large cavernous space of pure shadow opened. When he cast Lumos, he could see stairs

downwards. He descended them with Gilderoy, many of the candles from the room trailing after them into the secret library.

It was an unsettlingly beautiful place, wooden throughout with many ornate carved black columns between shelves, cobwebs and all, with the feeling of some presence there besides themselves. There was an antique desk covered with papers, and more than enough to space behind it to take the mirror to a back corner, behind more bookshelves to shield it further from view. Gilderoy finally took the edge spell off it, and it settled there like a waiting ghoul in flowing black.

"Do Sirius and Remus know about this place?" Draco asked, and Gilderoy shook his head, babbling something about having figured it out himself, before his good behavior gave way at last to adolescent temptation, and he sprang forward trying to pull the covering off the mirror.

"Oh, you've locked it! But- but how will I speak to Severus, if we-"

"He said you'd already worked out methods for that," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "And-" He steeled himself, though he was not the one about to be hurt, and waited until they had climbed out of the secret library before he broke the news. Gilderoy hurried to fluff some pillows and set them in Draco's chair before he sat. "It's not a portal, Gilderoy. It's an enchanted mirror. An important one, which I need you to keep secret from everyone. I mean *everyone.* Even Sirius and Remus. If you'd read the inscription, you'd see it says backwards, 'I show not your face, but your heart's desire'." Gilderoy's face remained blank in the floating candlelight. "Everyone sees something different. It shows you what you desire most in the world."

"Oh," Gilderoy breathed, and then covered his face, turning away.

It would defeat Draco's purposes to admit he'd already known, that he would have hoped as much, and even found it discouraging if Gilderoy had seen something or at least someone different. It would not have been ideal for him to see, say, Seguinus Sade. Or his adoring public back again.

"Gilderoy," Draco said, touching his shoulder cautiously, "If you hold my godfather in high regard, I wouldn't think *less* of you for it. Quite the contrary. I don't think it's likely he'd ever return any feelings, but... it speaks well of *you*, if you can see beneath the hard shell what an incredible person he is. What a hero."

"I'm sorry," Gilderoy said sadly. "What you must think... I never wanted anyone to know."

Except Severus, from that attempt as his secret admirer, but that hadn't exactly panned out. "I'm gay, you know," Draco said bluntly. "So the part that it's a man doesn't bother me."

"Oh, I figured *that*," Gilderoy said carelessly, "You've fancied Harry Potter since you were a child," and laughed at Draco's gobsmacked expression. "I didn't think you were trying to hide it," he said guilelessly, looking surprised by Draco's surprise. "The way you acted in that duel against him... it seemed so obvious you were enamored of the boy. That snake you conjured just to impress him..."

"It wasn't to *impress* him!" Draco protested. "But yes, er, I did... like him, and we're, uh, dating currently. You might have known if you got the Prophet. I can ask my guardians to let you start getting it if you want." He showed Gilderoy the initials necklace.

"I'm not allowed to send owls," Gilderoy said sadly, "But perhaps, just receiving... and congratulations, Draco! Harry was quite the fine young man when I knew him. I'm sure he's become even finer still, from the stories I've heard of his heroics. Is he what you see in that mirror?"

"Yes," Draco said, no point in hiding it. Gilderoy was more talkative than you might expect for four am, but then again, he must be starved for human company.

"You're in dress robes," Gilderoy observed, before seeming to discard that fact for greater curiosity. "What about Harry? Does he see you?"

"It's not just romantic," Draco explained. "It's the greatest desire of your heart, whatever that is. For Harry, it's seeing his dead parents, alive with him again. For Ron Weasley, he was Head Boy, Quidditch captain, winning the House Cup, all that. For Hermione Granger, it was defeating the Dark Lord and all of us living through it. You get it?"

"Draco," Gilderoy said, face taking on the first bit of reserve it had shown that night, "What is this mirror? Where did you get it? And why must I keep it secret?"

"Gilderoy," Draco sighed, fighting off the urge to say, *I'll keep your secrets, and you should keep mine.* Read, *Shut up and do as I say, or I'll tell Severus about your pathetic little infatuation.* "Please, don't you trust me? I trust *you,* or I wouldn't have intervened and put you in charge of my family's castle, the only family I have left who hasn't disowned me. *I* trust you, or I wouldn't have set *you* to be the one to talk to and look after and *protect* my godfather Severus. Can't you please just *trust* me?" He put a wobble in his voice, and cast his glance down, to seem childishly hurt rather than vindictive with his words.

That did the job. He had Gilderoy apologizing for so much as asking, before he Apparated back to Hogsmeade and snuck back into Hogwarts. Terry had noticed him missing, but Tony talked him into keeping it secret. Turned out there were benefits to having a boyfriend everyone loved. If people thought you did what you did for *Harry's* sake, they'd let you get away with anything.

So Draco had stolen the Mirror of Erised. That much was beyond dispute. Whether he *should* have stolen it, that was more of a question. But at any rate, the Mirror was his, and he hoped more such mirrors would join it.

He slept his way through the train ride back to Kings Cross, with his head pillowed in Harry's lap. Life was very good, except Luna was so ashen-faced and quiet, Draco was guilty he'd been too sleepy to make much of her. At least Hermione seemed to have been giving her hugs and reassurance. Luna went off with the Weasleys, and Draco hoped her father and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would prove comforting as well. Hermione went off with the Grangers, who exchanged hugs with Draco and civil, slightly fearful nods with Sirius and Remus. And it

was more of a relief than Draco would have expected, to see Sirius and Remus again, looking as strong and handsome and steady as they ever had, and- as always a relief to see- *alive.*

It was unnerving to take a second look at Remus after he hugged him, though, getting into the car Mundungus had waiting, and have to think, *Did you mishear Nott like I did, or not hear at all- or did you hear what he was* really *doing, and you've been lying for me?*

It was not so unlikely, for Remus to have lied for him. But it was far less likely for Remus to have done it without telling Draco. So Draco decided it must be the one of the two first options, and never, ever address it again. If he could live the rest of his life forgetting he had ever killed Cantankerous Nott, he would be grateful-

If Theo would let him. The debt claimed with that dagger was still waiting to be paid...

Remus was astute enough to make that his first question as soon as he and Draco were alone. Harry was successfully banished to his room, with promises of a lengthy visit soon. Meanwhile, Sirius looked annoyed to be sent away once he'd been put to work taking Draco and Harry's bags up, but he was assuaged by a few lingering kisses, tromping off down the stairs to grouse good-naturedly at Kreacher. They both seemed to assume Draco would be more likely to confide in just Remus. "I haven't wanted to discuss this in our letters," Remus began, "For fear they would be intercepted, but I've asked Harry, when we speak by the mirror. Theodore Nott..."

"Did Harry tell you he thought Theo was stalking me for a while?" Draco asked, flopping down onto his silver bed. Remus just nodded. Suddenly, his Patronus-blue room looked less appealing, even once he cast the spells to restore the wreath of blue fire. "But Theo wasn't. I think he just gave up or something."

"But you did have a run-in," Remus prompted. "We don't have to discuss this now if you're too tired from your trip. But I have wanted to gauge whether you still feel safe at Hogwarts. I am prepared to speak to Albus about having you leave Hogwarts if necessary-"

If he knew about the Black Dagger...

Theo has been fine, though- far better than I could have expected, after that- well, aside from following me around- because Halloween, that was just a dream...

"Shouldn't you be more focused on your replacement Hogwarts than kicking me out of the real one?" Draco blurted, and saw from Remus's expression that he'd hit at the truth.

"The idea is not to kick you out from anywhere," Remus said guardedly, "Only to let you know that if you feel unsafe at Hogwarts, there are other options to finish your education. Many options. Has someone said something to you about the rebuilding of the citadel? Severus? Gilderoy? Or did Frank or Alice say something to Neville-"

"They didn't need to. Who *couldn't* fill in those dots? We all know about the Naufragiam. Voldemort will have to take Hogwarts and *live* there, to survive for much longer. And if he does, Hogwarts will need a place to flee to. You've been rebuilding the citadel as *Order* business- it's a shelter, and not just for the Order. It's a *bigger* castle. Don't tell me it's never

crossed anyone's mind to fit it out for people to live there someday. Or, say, use it as a school?"

"We hope that using the citadel as a temporary replacement for Hogwarts is only a worst-case scenario. But yes, the time deadline the Naufragiam has imposed on Voldemort does indicate Hogwarts is even more likely to be attacked than before. And intelligence- chiefly from your godfather- indicates Voldemort has come to fully understand the Naufragiam..."

"Please tell me none of you suspect Severus of telling him." It would seem a possible suspicion, given that it had been an advanced potion made by Severus's own godson.

"It is not known how," Remus said gravely. "It is true that some of Voldemort's followers, such as Bellatrix Lestrange, let alone Voldemort himself, are well-versed enough in arcane magic to have discovered the potion independently and made the connection- stop *glaring*, sweetheart, I promise, we do not think it was Severus, no one does. Not even Sirius." At Draco's disbelieving look, Remus put an arm around Draco's shoulders. "Yes, even Sirius would not believe your godfather would give over intelligence of a crime *you* committed to the Dark Lord, and imperil you further..."

"I'd rather he tell," Draco said steadily, "Then be tortured for not telling," and Remus came over and hugged him tightly. "Yeah, I missed you too, you great moony-faced wolfman," Draco muttered, and let his face be smushed against Remus's shoulder.

"I missed you very much," Remus sighed. "Sirius and I have been extraordinarily busy, I fear, preparing the citadel for the worst case scenario. Gilderoy is a great help with the rebuilding of the structure- yes, I was shocked at it myself at first- and Frank and Alice are putting their preparation to resume working as Aurors on hold, to assist us full-time with the citadel. But there are still materials that the four of us must secure, furniture, equipment, *enchantments*- and we must do so much of the transport and setup ourselves. We are hampered by the need to keep the island as secret as possible. The Fidelius charm would be little use, since the Death Eaters already know, but our focus has been making it completely unassailable. In contrast, yes, to the night of our wedding..."

Draco leaned against Remus's side and listened, absorbing more of Remus's comforting tone and presence than anything. The information registered, yes, but the greatest relief was to be near Remus's calm self-command again, so different to anyone he had ever met. He could trust in Remus's wisdom, but more than that, he could trust in Remus's goodness. If he was in Remus's protection, doing what Remus thought was right, he was surely not forsaken. Not unforgivable.

So when Remus asked, he told him the truth- most of it. He told him more than he had told anyone else of the incidents with Theo. Remus had already heard about the graveyard from Harry. But he had known nothing of their confrontations in the dungeons. He could see pity on Remus's face for Theo, when Draco told how he had admitted it was Theo's pendant that protected him during the attack, and the way it had made Theo cry.

Remus's pity hardened to wariness, though, when Draco described demanding that Theo show him his wrist, and Theo's refusal and the subsequent duel. Draco omitted the circumstances that prompted his demand, with Theo skulking around Severus's chambers. He

didn't want to incriminate Severus in anything, and if that was a mistake, so be it. He also tailored his description to make the duel sound less one-sided than it had been. Remus heaved a sigh of relief when Draco spoke of the absence of a Dark Mark on Theo. The only difficulty came when Remus asked if that confrontation had truly been the last time they spoke at any length.

Draco grabbed onto Remus's shoulder hard to ground himself then, feeling like a small child with his father, and was amazed Remus would let him cling like this. Father never had, even when he was small, just impressed on him that shows of fear were not befitting a Malfoy. "I think so. And please, don't tell Harry any of this. He only knows about the graveyard, and even that freaked him out. He's overprotective- even if there *was* danger from Theo, and I don't think there is- I wouldn't want Harry caught up in it. I think Theo gave up on revenge, after we dueled and he saw he couldn't beat me- but Remus, there was just... I had this dream on Halloween..."

"A dream?" Remus said, and something in Draco's chest cracked.

"The night at the Ministry. Did you hear what spell Mr. Nott was casting? Did you hear Avada Kedavra?"

"I don't know. It all happened so fast. I don't think I heard anything. I just saw the motion of him about to cast something on Sirius's body."

"But you told the authorities that you heard him say *Avada.*"

"I wasn't certain I hadn't." Remus was frowning. "I'm still not. And Draco, *you* said you heard it, that's good enough for me. I trust you. And I want the best for you. I didn't want there to be any more doubt. I didn't *think* I was lying-"

"You weren't," Draco cut in, quickly but firmly, remembering his promise to Severus. Feeling his own terror, at the thought with each person more than him and Severus who knew the truth, even if they were trustworthy, the possibility increased exponentially that the truth would someday make its way to Theo. "It *is* what Mr. Nott said. The killing curse. I just wanted to know you were sure, in case Theo ever tried to bring some kind of- I don't know, legal or civil case, now that it seems violent revenge is off the table..."

"Don't worry, Draco. As far as I am concerned, if you tell me you heard *Avada*, that is what I will tell everyone, even Sirius, that I heard too."

The twins had stocked Weasley's Wizard Wheezes with Peruvian instant darkness powder. They did not prove, however, overly inclined to sell Draco their entire supply, despite Draco's ability to pay, extra if needed. If anything, it made them suspicious.

"It's too inconvenient," Draco lied brightly, "To have to keep putting the bluebell flames in my room at Grimmauld out and on," and secured a generous supply, if not all. Fred looked like he might have pressed him, but their business was too bustling to waste more time on their brother's friend. After all, it was Christmas Eve.

The war had not much dented business for the twins, nor had it at Gladrags, after Draco left Harry with the twins to go present-shopping for Gilderoy. It was so packed, Draco was considering blood magic before he was through. Another reason to regret this, aside from the stares he got from all and sundry. It was not always discernible, those gradations between *look at Harry Potter's boyfriend* and *look at the queer* or *look at the murderer*.

Only a pair of young women had the nerve to approach, with yesterday's issue of the Prophet in hand. "So it's true?" one of the women asked aggressively, thrusting the picture of him and Harry holding hands in his face. Apparently attending the Slug Club party as Harry Potter's date was front page news. Even with an actual war on. At least it wasn't a picture of them under the mistletoe. "You and Harry Potter went on a date? You're really a couple?"

"Do you have him under the Imperius curse?" the other woman asked.

Draco very resolutely did *not* imagine what her limbs would look like shaken and bent in the contortions of a *different* Unforgivable. He just walked away.

The lady at the counter looked rather nauseated. When he asked for the coat gift-wrapped, she looked down at its lavish fur, lip curling squeamishly, and asked, "Is *this* for *Harry Potter*?"

Apparently the Ravenclaw blue and bronze didn't register. And Draco couldn't exactly tell her it was for Gilderoy. "Please, I just need it wrapped."

Draco was never going shopping here by himself again. If only he could have brought Hermione. She would have told that shopgirl exactly what she thought of her, and somehow did it in a way that wouldn't end in Aurors coming to arrest them. *At least then maybe Shacklebolt wouldn't be so keen on me joining up.* But he would sooner be six feet under than let himself be arrested by *Cedric Diggory.*

He made it back to Grimmauld just in time to see Hermione, along with her parents, who looked grateful to see Draco waiting for them. That car Draco once called their family beast was parked on the dingy street. An embarrassed part of him wished it was Malfoy Manor he was showing the Grangers, but he pushed it aside. Before long, the Blacks would have the citadel ready. And that probably even had better dungeons somewhere under all that rubble.

"There you are, son!" Mr. Granger enfolded him in a bear hug. "Look how you've grown!" He had a whole bag of presents. "So which of these townhouses is yours?"

"Okay, this part is tricky. I could just get in myself, but to let Muggles into the wards, I might have to go old-school..."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Hermione hissed, drawing him aside. She and her mother looked adorable, in similar cranberry-red cocktail dresses- they'd clearly gone shopping together, lucky Mrs. Granger, while Draco suffered Gladrags alone. And both women also looked dubious. "I know my parents were allowed in Diagon Alley, but does the Statute of Secrecy really allow Muggleborn parents into wizarding *homes*..."

"Hermione, you're seventeen, the Trace stopped working on you after your birthday," Draco reassured her. "Okay, don't let your parents freak out. Talpa!" Both Grangers whipped around, not used to magic practiced around them.

Draco's Disillusionment charm encircled them. A brief check ensured there were no other Muggles around. "Sanguirenere," Draco cast, but nothing appeared between 11 and 13. It was a surreal feeling, the Grangers' polite, patient eyes on the talon wand. "Sanguirenere. Draco Lupin Black, heir to House Black," he intoned, and nothing. The Muggles' presence was likely deterring it.

Okay, this was embarrassing. He hadn't *wanted* to resort to blood magic in front of the Grangers. But if he had to, he had to. Except maybe he should have stuck to casting Diffindo, and not gotten out his beloved dagger right in front of them. Mrs. Granger let out a shriek, and Mr. Granger stepped back warily at the sight of a knife drawn, especially once its ornate sheath was pulled off to reveal a very sharp blade. "Don't worry, not gonna hurt anyone, it's just my ritual dagger!"

Hermione's sharp gaze seemed to say, *They're supposed to find that reassuring*?

When Draco cut his palm open, Mr. and Mrs. Grangers stepped all the way back into the road. "Don't worry," Draco called, "See, nobody's getting hurt," and raised his palm in demonstration before letting blood drip over the pavement. Hermione's parents cried out in amazement as Number 12 emerged, sliding out like a ship's mast to welcome them, a ship with black sails.

Blood smeared on the knocker, with a few more casts of Sanguirenere, got the door open. Draco held it, leading them into the gloomy entrance hall, where the paintings had been covered with locked curtains. He lingered to cast Vulnera satentur, and he did see curiosity as well as trepidation on their faces, as they leaned to watch the slice slowly close and then erase itself.

"Showoff," Hermione said affectionately. Once Draco's hands were clean, he gave her such a clingy, nuzzling hug, she was shrieking and laughing, trying to get away before he was through.

"I think," Mr. Granger said shakily, "I can see why your nickname is Frankenstein."

Draco smirked, making Hermione shake her head, before he led the Grangers in and gave the briefest of tours. Remus's work refurbishing the place, along with the Order's assistance cleaning it, had taken away some of the foreboding aspect, but the place still bore quite the gothic air. Mr. and Mrs. Granger seemed to be struggling for kind things to say. "It's, er, much larger than it looks on the outside," Mr. Granger finally mustered. Although that wasn't saying much, since before a spell, you couldn't see it on the outside at all.

Hermione made warning noises as they climbed the stairs, but Draco still brought them to the Black tapestry. Muggles were so adorable. Their reaction, somehow, was *dismay* for poor Sirius, that all of his immediate family had passed away. As if that hadn't been Sirius's dream. "And his brother Regulus! So young!"

They also were pleased to find Harry and Draco present on the tapestry as the adopted children of Sirius and Remus. When Harry told them he and Draco were still dating- *going strong*, he said, making Draco stare at the floor to hide his giddy smile- Mrs. Granger clapped her hands in glee. She and Mr. Granger seemed so glad to see her daughter's poor orphan friend Harry find love, as well as a new family.

Sirius and Remus's matching years of birth led to Sirius wandering in with his Santa's hat on rakishly askew, happily telling romantic stories of his days wooing Remus at Hogwarts. That set the festive mood, with the smell of Christmas dinner filtering up, at least until Mrs. Granger asked the deceptively simple question, "Draco, where are your parents?"

Hermione's parents couldn't have missed how the question made the five other people in the room, including their daughter, go stiff as the grave. Mrs. Granger looked abashed. "I was just wondering on which side Sirius is your uncle."

"First cousin, once removed," Draco said tightly, and traced his finger from Sirius over to two of the black spaces. Harry touched his shoulders from behind, grip not over-strong but still secure, and it made the tremor threatening to shake Draco's voice go away. "Narcissa. That's my mother. Sirius's cousin. And she married Lucius Malfoy. That blasted place below them? That's where my name used to be."

The Grangers were quiet for some time. They didn't seem to dare ask, but Draco took pity on them. "Hermione told you I was disowned, right? It's just to do with the process." Draco exerted himself clowning about energetically then, and made Harry laugh so hard, they were festive again by the time they sat down for dinner. Which thankfully had been cooked by Remus, not Kreacher. Kreacher could not only not be counted on not to burn the food, but also not to poison it, not with these houseguests. The house elf Hermione called *the Grinch* for some reason had been strictly forbidden to leave his room on Christmas Eve.

They had dinner in the formal dining room with its great chandelier of snakes, many of which unfurled and hissed. Remus's roast rabbit and sweet potatoes were almost good, and set off well by the expensive chardonnay the Grangers brought- *almost* enough to distract from the thousand inconvenient questions the Muggles asked guilelessly. Questions like, *What is this calendar on the wall to do with the moon?* and *How have those at Hogwarts received your relationship with Draco, Harry*? or *What is your family castle called- oh, Xaphan, is that in reference to something?* and *Do your families have any Christmas traditions?* or *I'm sorry all of your immediate family have passed, Sirius, we saw on the tapestry, how terrible for you...*

Not to mention the kicker. Sirius made a show of getting out another bottle of wine, this one centuries-old. The sixth-years were allowed to drink, in supervised quantities. And that supervised quantity was nowhere near enough for this question. While he fussed about, arguing with Remus playfully over the vintage, Mr. Granger drew Draco aside. "I'm glad you seem happy with your uncles. But do you mind if I ask, son, what happened with your parents? Why did they disown you?"

He probably suspected it was the gay issue. "I got a letter," Draco said sardonically. "You want to see it? I gave it to Remus, and then I took it back. Now I carry it, when I have my bag with me. I don't look at it much, but having it's a reminder..."

Draco hadn't expected Mr. Granger to accept the letter. Thankfully, he didn't get past peering down, trying to work out how to pronounce Wizengamot, before an eagle-eyed Hermione snatched it away, saving her father. "He wouldn't understand it!" she hissed furiously in his ear. "And even if he did, he still thinks of you as this- this *schoolboy* who helped his daughter, who would never hurt a fly. Let him- just- let him keep thinking of you that way."

Hermione likely had no intention of ever letting them know how adept *she* was getting with dark magic.

"I'm confiscating this," Harry said, snatching it as nimbly aside as a Snitch, "Till you can be trusted not to brood over it," and Draco protested, but none too firmly.

He followed her lead. They retreated with their drinks, along with a plate of adorable Christmas gingerbreads and marzipans, to sit beside the tree and roaring fire, and exchange gifts. Draco had gotten the Grangers a lavish custom tapestry for their dining room. They seemed overawed by it, although not resentful. The scene was at least cheerier than Severus's, day rather than night. Even if the mountain range and glacial lakes did bear a resemblance to the Ripollès range of the Spanish Pyrenees, where one might find the Pic de L'Infern if so inclined.

The other gifts were more modest, though the Grangers seemed touched by the Beauty and the Beast necklace for Hermione, hearing he had made it entirely from scratch, and transfigured the rose within the glass jar from a real shrunken rose. Hermione gave Draco a magical locket, charmed only to open for him, a concept that amazed the Grangers when explained. The Grangers gave Draco an Arsenal flag for his room, which Draco insisted on immediately putting up, not in his bedroom but in the sitting room. When he came back, he found them gifting Sirius and Remus wall art as well, a skyline picture of London painted by a mate who sat near Mr. Granger at Highbury. They really did need more non-macabre decorations in Grimmauld. Draco insisted on mounting that as well. Which meant more shows of magic in front of the Grangers, but none of it seemed to shake them as much as the blood magic had.

Mr. Granger gave Harry a football, sturdy crimson in Arsenal colors, and expressed their hope that Harry could become a football man as well, now that he was dating one. Harry winced, mumbling something about being no good at it, hating football in gym class- hating all of gym class, really, back in Muggle school. "Did Dudley bully you about there too?" Draco whispered, and Harry nodded tightly. Draco busied himself to change the subject, and Harry put the red football away.

With Remus setting up a record player for some jazzy Christmas music, it became a successful night, lulling them into complacency, peace and goodwill for mankind and all that. Christmas harmony reigned, before it was brought unceremoniously down with the arrival of Kreacher. He not been ordered specifically enough. Remus had said *for Christmas Eve,* and the Grangers had stayed past midnight. Like Cinderella's carriage going back to to a pumpkin, the turn of midnight changed Grimmauld from its welcoming facade of safety, to...

"Blood traitors! Blood traitors, filth in the House of Black! Muggles! *Muggles* in the House of Black! Animals, eyes unfit to see the wizard Yuletide!" Kreacher stalked into the room and snapped his fingers, sending the Christmas tree sideways. Ornaments cracked and flew about,

Mrs. Granger leaping aside to keep from getting hit. Kreacher snapped his fingers again, and the new painting of London and the Arsenal flag fell down. "Muggle excrement and contamination on the walls! Kreacher will not suffer it! KREACHER WILL NOT!"

"Protego!" Draco cast, keeping the painting from falling on Mr. and Mrs. Granger. They shrieked anyway, staring at old wizened Kreacher like some demon.

"It's alright, he's a house elf, he lives here," Hermione said, stepping between him and her parents. "He's been into the Christmas ale too much, I think." It was true that Kreacher reeked of alcohol- Sirius should *not* have left the wine cellars open- but it wasn't like Kreacher was deviating from his usual personality. He just had liquid courage in those ancient veins, his unpleasant visage contorted in the purest of hatreds.

"Kreacher, go back to your room!" Draco ordered, but Kreacher had covered his ears tightly with his hands.

"Don't have to obey if I can't hear you! And Kreacher will have his say!" Kreacher cackled. "You are a disgrace to the name of your aunt, invert! To the great beauty and glory of Bellatrix Lestrange..."

"Don't you dare insult Draco! And don't you dare speak well of *that* name, in *this* house! GO BACK TO YOUR ROOM!" Harry bellowed. But Kreacher's temporary ear-blocking seemed effective. The so-called grinch's drunken attention turned to looking about for more to wreck.

Remus lifted his wand, though, and the painting and the flag re-hung themselves. Then the tree righted itself, and the ornaments came back together, unbreaking and going right back into place.

Draco had only ever seen Dumbledore perform magic like that, and only once before. "Dumbledore did that for Slughorn's house," Harry whispered, "Maybe he taught Remus!"

"Or Remus is just a great wizard," Draco whispered back, far less impressed by Dumbledore than Harry was at the moment. Mr. and Mrs. Granger at least seemed sufficiently appreciative, regarding humble quiet Remus with thunderstruck expressions. And Sirius had an inappropriate appreciation within *his* stare. Such a show of power in his husband seemed to appeal to him singularly, even under these circumstances.

"No harm done," Remus said calmly. "Kreacher, it's late, why don't you-"

"Oh, fix it, yes, *fix* it," Kreacher slurred, pulling his hands from his ears, "But there is no fixing what you have done to this noble house, *werewolf*!" He pointed at Remus and Sirius leaped to his feet, from drunkenly horny to murderous. From the stricken looks on the Grangers' faces, Draco had the sinking feeling Muggles had werewolf legends of their own.

"You shriveled old monster!" Sirius yelled. But Kreacher was unrepentant. It was written over his face, the satisfaction that he alone in this room could identify everyone here for whom and *what* they were. If the others could or would not, well, he *would* be the one to tell them.

"Animals," he said, pointing at each of the Grangers in turn. "Filth unworthy to set foot in these ancient halls. *Mudblood*," he said, pointing at Hermione with a finger shaking with savage hatred, a hatred her consistent attempts at friendliness had only seemed to fuel. "Blood traitor!" he snarled at Draco, then turned to Harry. "Half-blood breed of a Mudblood *bitch*!" Draco had to hold Harry back, hugging him around the middle from behind.

"Blood traitor!" Kreacher snarled at Sirius, then turned back to Remus with grim satisfaction. "Werewolf! Nasty half-breed *werewolf*! Muggles didn't know, didn't they? They see the moon on the wall, and yet, dumb animals, they are not understanding, but Kreacher, *Kreacher* knows! Kreacher has always known the *abomination* you are! ABOMINATION!"

"Kreacher, come with me," Sirius ordered, face white, and his order finally worked. He marched the soused grinch out. When he came back, he claimed he had given Kreacher no punishment harsher than locking him in his room and silencing around it. Draco doubted that, and hoped his doubts were right. But lying was useless. A stone-faced Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked like they wanted to find the closest exit. It was to the others to explain exactly how it was alright, that they had let their daughter spend an entire summer under the same roof as a werewolf.

"You know," Draco breathed in Sirius's ear, as Harry and Hermione tried in vain in explain the management of Remus's condition, and reassure the Grangers how safe it was. "There's an easier solution. And if me or Remus aren't up to it, we happen to have a friend bound to help our family, one known for his prowess with that particular solution..."

Sirius didn't even look surprised. "But Hermione would never forgive us if we Obliviated her parents."

"What if we have to, though? They'll never understand this. And they'll never forgive you two not telling them before she spent the summer here. They're freaking out. They won't want Hermione around any of us, not even me. I don't *think* they'd pull Hermione out of Hogwarts, but-"

Hermione sidled over, pale-faced and tight-lipped. "Do either of you know," she hissed, "How to cast a targeted Obliviation charm?"

Harry did a good job keeping Mr. and Mrs. Granger occupied, distracting them with tales of Quidditch matches, while Sirius did the job of fetching Gilderoy. Mr. and Mrs. Granger seemed bound to the codes of civility, though how much that was just fear to anger the silent werewolf sat in the corner, there was no telling. But they stayed there sympathetically listening to Harry's Snitch catch reenactments. They did not flinch back too much when Harry called Remus over to explain, oblivious why Sirius had gone and sticking with his naive faith in the fruitfulness of honesty. When prompted, Remus told haltingly of his boyhood incident, being bitten by a werewolf. Draco drew Hermione into the hallway to wait there instead, saying that Remus wouldn't want them to hear it. He wasn't sure if that was true, but he just didn't want to think of the memories it brought back of Fenrir Greyback.

Twin pops of Apparition, then Sirius's grim face appeared, along with the one person at Grimmauld at all happy to be there at the moment.

"Draco!" Gilderoy exclaimed, so excitedly that Draco had to put a finger to his lips. Then he looked at Hermione and frowned. "My! You can't be Miss Granger! My best and brightest student! My, how you've grown!"

"Hello, Professor Lockhart," Hermione said, fidgeting rather shyly. Draco didn't think her old crush on Lockhart had at all survived- she was probably just embarrassed by the memory of it- but he wished he'd told her as well as Ron of Lockhart's attachment to Severus.

"Well," Gilderoy sighed, "Frankly, Miss Granger, I should say sorry to you, as I did to Draco. I was not qualified to be your professor, and you must have learned very little in my course-"

"Gilderoy," Sirius said through gritted teeth, looking to have about as much patience for the man as Severus did. "Can you do your apology tour later? I explained the situation. Now *do* it-"

"And what a charming home!" Gilderoy exclaimed, cheerfulness undaunted. "So many *drapes*!"

"Who is that?" Harry said, coming out at the unfamiliar voice, then froze. "Is that- are you Professor Lockhart?" he asked dubiously, and Gilderoy looked thrilled at his reunion with another student, starting the cycle all over again.

"Mr. Potter! How tall and strong you've grown! An O on your Defense OWL! Congratulations! And you're Draco's fellow, I hear! My! I did always have a suspicion about the two of you- the way you would stare at him every night in the Great Hall-"

"I didn't *like* him back then, not like that," Harry muttered, cheeks going red, "I just thought he was the Heir of Slytherin," but Gilderoy's smile was hardly dented.

"Ah, but did you really, or did you have no other explanation for the feelings he awoke in you? Really, my instincts are peerless in *this* department. And I can't tell you how pleased I am to have been right!" Gilderoy beamed. "I do hope you make Draco happy, he's been so patient and kind and generous to me-"

Sirius, Hermione, and Harry all turned to Draco with similar baffled expressions, as if hearing him described as *patient and kind and generous* was as senseless as calling him merciful. Draco rolled his eyes at them before turning a sweeter face towards Gilderoy. "Of course, what would make me happy right now is your *help*- to, ah, help make Mr. and Mrs. Granger happier again..."

That pulled Gilderoy back on task, somehow. "Alright, Miss Granger, where are these poor parents of yours? I promise, my dear, if there is one charm I'm qualified to perform, it's this. It will all be fine."

And it was. They had the joy of the sight of a man otherwise floundering put back thoroughly in his element. What Protego Diabolica had purportedly been to Grindelwald, Obliviate was

to Gilderoy Lockhart. He was an artist with it, casting slowly and carefully with pinpoint precision, and causing no pain or surprise or discomfort.

When he was done, Mr. and Mrs. Granger had not forgotten any of the night before Kreacher's appearance, but after that, it was a blank. If the clock said two instead of midnight, well, time had flown by with good company and better refreshment. Hermione used the infrequently-used landline at Grimmauld to call a cab, and her parents left with a far better impression of Sirius and Remus than before.

Christmas morning brought any number of presents from Draco's new guardians, let alone his friends, but the best present was a certain someone's presence.

It was perhaps good that Harry slept in later than Draco that morning. Draco snuck down the stairs without him, planning to put Harry's present at the front of the pile, but then robes billowed before him. Robes only ever strictly in black.

"SEVERUS!"

"I am not here for any unseemly display of *holiday spirit*," Severus warned, only to be nearly bowled over anyway, as Draco executing a flying leap down the last few stairs to embrace him. "This is not a Christmas visit- unhand me, burdensome godson-"

Draco kept his grip, beaming from ear-to-ear. "Christmas together! Christmas Day together as godfather and godson!"

"What is this advanced stage of delusion?" Severus shook Draco off, gaze traveling from Draco's Arsenal pajamas to the Arsenal flag, in growing disgust. "One had expected more intelligence from a *Ravenclaw*-"

"Severus, Severus!" Draco bounced where he stood. It was probably just his imagination, the way Severus's glare softened, before sliding back into place.

"I am here," Severus said drolly, "To inquire after the custodianship of your purported guardians. Given the watch they have kept over their nominal *prisoner*, only can only shudder at their prospects with this vain boy-"

"Oh, were you looking for Gilderoy? You don't need to-"

"'Gilderoy'. Yes, I remain, much to my inalterable *indignation*, the liaison between Hogwarts and Xaphan. The headmaster had an 'urgent message' for Lockhart that he *insisted* I deliver posthaste. Imagine my *chagrin*, to arrive at a castle only to find its court jester not in attendance-"

"Oh, he's here." Dumbledore couldn't possibly have already caught onto where the Mirror of Erised had gone, could he? Unless the tie to the Elder Wand was-

Draco managed to seize the letter and package, and shamelessly ripped them both open. There was nothing more than a note wishing Happy Christmas, and several pairs of thick

warm woolly gray socks. Draco separated the socks, looked them all over, and cast several revealing charms on both them and the letter, before he decided he was being paranoid even by his own standards.

Unfortunately, this made Draco slow following Severus up the stairs, who was stalking towards the sound of Gilderoy's voice. Gilderoy was calling down to Draco, having heard his voice yelling, but apparently not the words. "Oh, Draco, you're awake too!" Gilderoy sounded as unduly cheerful as last night. "Everything alright down there? I'll be down in a minute- I've just been enjoying these lovely accommodations- you can't imagine the relief of running water, to properly do my *hair*-"

"Lockhart, if you think you can just leave the citadel whenever you please," Severus was seething, stalking towards the guest room with Draco jogging after him. "I have better things to do than to waste my time chasing after-"

"Severus, wait, he's allowed to be here, Sirius brought him-"

But Severus had already thrown the door open with a flick of his wand, storming forward only for his voice as well as Draco's to die at the threshold. Lockhart was calling out as he emerged from the en-suite bathroom, just out of the shower, toweling his hair dry. He was naked, but it was not his body that rendered them speechless, but what that tanned skin wore instead of clothes: unhealed scars.

Draco would have expected fang marks, but not *so* many, or so dark and deep. It was like fangs had punctured the same places over and over, each time the skin healed. If it had ever been given a long enough interval to heal *between*. There were marks on either side of Gilderoy's neck, another pair below the collarbones at each artery, and then around two dozen scattered over his arms, chest, wrists, legs, and ankles. The darkest were on his thighs, a trail of puncture marks over the line of each femoral artery, the shade of crushed blackberries. On the right thigh, they led like a map to the only mark in a shape other than fangs or a jagged gash: below the hipbone, likely carved by a knife or very precise fangs, were initials like a brand. *S.S.*

Gilderoy jerked in shock, prattle cutting off. He darted to pull on a robe, a one of Remus's borrowed plain black dressing gowns. It was too late to hide, though. All the motion did was show a back covered in more marks.

"Well!" Gilderoy turned back with unperturbed jauntiness. If it was an act, it was a damn good one. "Happy Christmas! I'm sure Draco is delighted to see his godfather. Oh, are you wondering why little old me is here? It's a funny story..."

Severus barely seemed to listen to the narrative that followed. He hadn't been there for the full interview at the Ministry, after all, where Draco had heard some gory details about Castell de L'Infern. And Draco hadn't even been prepared for the extent of it. It was one thing to hear, and another to see with his own eyes, how much that pretentious name had not been a misnomer.

It left Severus unusually somber and quiet. When Sirius and Remus came down offering their excuses, Sirius offered to take Gilderoy back at once, but Severus just stared at them all

blankly. In Gilderoy's shoes, Draco would have been fearing pity, even from Severus.

Remus seemed to sense an awkwardness in the air where Sirius hadn't. "Let me," Remus said. "Get dressed, Gilderoy, and then *I'll* take you back. Don't worry, Severus, I'll make sure he's settled at Xaphan and won't be going anywhere." When Harry came stumbling down the stairs in his pajamas, rubbing his eyes, Remus directed him back to go change and *try and put some order to that hair for the holidays, sweetheart*. Harry gave Draco a little *Happy Christmas* wave of wiggled fingers, which Draco returned, before he wandered back up again.

Severus took back the package and letter, and offered them wordlessly. Gilderoy didn't blink at them being pre-opened, like a prisoner's possessions searched for contraband. He enthused over the socks like they were a Witch Weekly's best smile award. "My, Severus, a Christmas present, from *you*? I never could have *dreamed*!"

Draco knew he would break the truth to Gilderoy far more kindly than Severus would. "It's from Dumbledore, actually, if you look at the letter."

Draco had hoped to help Gilderoy hide his infatuation, but he didn't know how Sirius, Remus, Severus, Harry upstairs, Kreacher up in his room, or some Muggles halfway down the street could have missed Gilderoy's wounded sigh, or the way he deflated like a punctured peacock-shaped balloon. "Oh. Well, give the headmaster my, er, gratitude," Gilderoy said gloomily. "I never imagined I would get any presents at all."

His spirits were revived when Draco presented him with a larger present. "For me?" Gilderoy asked disbelievingly. Despite the incredulous look all four men were giving Draco, he nodded brightly. Gilderoy ripped open the silver wrapping eagerly, only to cry out in amazement at the sight of the fur. He raced over to inspect himself in the nearest reflective surface, a china cabinet filled with the few House Black ceramics Draco had saved from Sirius. "It's Ravenclaw colors!"

"From one Ravenclaw to another. It's cold on Xaphan."

Gilderoy seemed to want to hug him, but not to dare. Instead, he hugged Draco's arm, seizing it with fur-covered arms and babbling his thanks so profusely, Draco was grateful when Remus Apparated them out. Draco went up the stairs to change, only to stop halfway up when he realized he had made the worst mistake possible under this roof. He'd left Severus and Sirius alone together.

He raced down only to find a scene quite different than he had feared. Instead of drawn wands and snarls, Severus looked dumbfounded, for a second time that morning. Sirius fidgeted before Severus, in the process of doing something to Severus that Draco would have thought far, far less plausible than cold-blooded murder.

It didn't seem true, even happening right before Draco's eyes, but it was. Sirius was apologizing to Severus.

"I know that you don't want to hear this," Sirius was saying. "I know you wish I was dead. And I know it won't change anything, but I'm saying it anyway, because it's true. I'm sorry

about what I did to you back at school." He took a deep breath, hands clenched to fists at his sides. His handsome face set with Gryffindor resolution. Draco could tell he was sincere, if only because of how hard this clearly was for him. "I'm sorry I sent you after Remus that night."

"You. Black. You... you do not mean this. You cannot."

"Remus apologized to you, didn't he?" Sirius said defensively. "Years ago. Why can't I?"

The men had nearly three meters between each other, and showed no sign of closing the distance. They were both stiff-shouldered and tense, and looked more likely to draw their wands than genuinely reconcile. They were the two proudest men Draco knew. He loved them both, and he feared for them both. He watched from the landing, unnoticed.

"Remus," Severus said dismissively, "Was not at fault for the incident itself. He says he knew nothing of your intentions, and I believe him. His apology was for not taking you to account for it. Because you are incapable of holding *yourself* accountable, Black. This is some trick. Or Remus or Draco has pressured you into this farce-"

"Will you just listen?" Sirius barked, voice rising. His shoulders rose and fell, heaving a breath of suppressed frustration, if not animosity still. "They didn't. This was what I realized I have to do. Neither of them even know I'm doing this. They'd probably tell me not to, that nothing good could come of it- and you- you don't have to *accept* my apology. I never expected you to. I'm just saying I know I could have gotten you killed, and I know now, that was *wrong*." Incredibly, Sirius's voice broke slightly, with feeling. "It couldn't have been *more* wrong. It was a monstrous thing to do. Monstrous. I should have said it before. But I'm saying it now-"

"Why did you do it, then?" Severus interrupted, arms crossing around his black-clad figure. He bore a sudden resemblance to the sallow teenager Draco had seen in the Pensieve, something of the smallness and insecurity. "Why did you send me to die?"

"I didn't mean to," Black began. Thinking of the words seemed a real effort, let alone forcing them out. "I thought of it as- it was like it was just another prank. A clever way to scare you and get you to leave Remus alone. It never entered my head you might die."

"Or get bitten and become a werewolf as well?" Severus asked silkily, with eyes that didn't know what to believe.

"It didn't seem possible," Sirius insisted, looking sickened by the memory. "I don't know why, okay? I guess I was just used to everything working out for me in the end-"

"Naturally." Severus's lip curled. "Sirius of the House *Black.* The heir. The *prince.* Rich and powerful. Even once disowned, left House Black *money.* You believed yourself invulnerable. *Invincible.*" His voice was so raw, it was like the incident had happened yesterday. Maybe, inside Severus, it still had.

Draco's throat went choked for Severus. He grabbed hard onto the banister. He saw Severus leaning against the wall, hand gripping there to steady himself too, either against the torture

of the memory being relived, or the corrosive force of his own spite.

"And you saw me as beneath you. Barely even *human.* If I had died, you wouldn't have cared."

"Yeah," Sirius said, closing his eyes for a moment. "Yeah, you're probably right." Severus's eyes shot open in disbelief. "I was reckless, because it was you, and because I was always reckless. It's hard to understand who I was back then. It wasn't... it wasn't good. It wasn't the man I *want* to be, for Remus's sake. Or to take care of Harry and Draco. I don't know how Remus *could* have loved who I was back then. I..." He seemed to still be struggling to gather his thoughts. "I wish I could take it back. *Everything* we did to you. There was the four of us, and you were all alone. I saw what that felt like. In Azkaban. I learned how it felt to be alone, and-"

"Why now?" Severus said guardedly. "Is it Draco? Now that you've adopted him along with the Potter boy, you want to reconcile with Draco's godfather? For their sake?"

"It is because of Draco. But not like you think. I've just seen- I don't know, the way you *are* with him. What you mean to him. Even after your connection with him got you hurt by the Dark Lord- got you tortured- you've kept looking after him, haven't you? He talks about you in all his letters home, about things you say. Remus already thought this, he tried to tell me, and even I can't deny it anymore- you're a good godfather. What Harry means to me as my godson, he means to you, doesn't he? Because Draco was an orphan just as much as Harry." Draco shut his eyes tightly. "His parents are just as gone to him. And Harry and Draco have people to look after them now, but... if Draco didn't always have you, I don't know who he would have been. Maybe he would have been like his father. But instead, he's like you."

"Yes," Severus said, with a sharp edge of pride. "Yes, he is."

"So I'm sorry," Sirius said heavily. "And I'm glad you didn't die- and we'll probably never get along, and you don't have to forgive me- *don't* forgive me, what I did was unforgivable. Just- know that I *know* you're a good person, and that you didn't deserve what I did to you, Severus. That's all."

Severus stared at Sirius, so long that Draco feared Severus would draw his wand. If he did, Cruciatus seemed the *best* possibility of what might come.

But instead, finally, Severus nodded, and Apparated out without a word.

The Observatory

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco's mind was full of what he had seen, both with Lockhart and with Severus and Sirius, as he spent his first ever Christmas at the Burrow. Even with Harry there, adorable in his Weasley sweater with his clingy, attentive charm, Draco found himself distracted. He would have regardless, with how Luna was acting. It was not upset, precisely, but distant, even with her father there, the now-longtime occupant of the Burrow who had built himself an extended section of the ramshackle construction just for the Lovegoods. He seemed fast friends with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and quite happy to spend Christmas there, not far from their own house. But Luna was just quiet.

She only reacted much when they were finishing the presents and the Floo came alight. Mr. Weasley reassured everyone that they had checked thoroughly and the Floo to the Longbottoms was safe, just like the one between here and Grimmauld. Luna paled, then raced up the stairs quicker than Draco would have thought her capable, making it out of there in time to avoid seeing Neville.

Draco had to stay and exchange brief greetings, with Frank and Alice as interested and attentive with Draco as ever. It was an impediment when all he wanted was to get to Luna. He managed to avoid addressing Neville's curious stare, clearly wondering after his girlfriend. He snuck off up the stairs in a few minutes, finding his way into the Lovegood extension to the Burrow.

Luna was sitting in the room that had been made hers, garish in shades of pink and green and silver, filled with odd contraptions and fold-out posters from the Quibbler, messy with clothing all over the floor. She was on the bed, sitting up against the pillows, staring at the opposite wall blankly. When Draco went over and seized her shoulders in a hug, she tensed up before recognizing it as him.

"I don't want to see Neville," Luna said softly, pressing her face into Draco's chest. Draco sat facing her, and she grabbed onto him and buried her face there, mumbling the words against his cashmere sweater. "I can't bear it. I can't face him, Draco, I'm sorry... if he sent you, I don't know what to say..."

"He didn't. We all just said hello. And then I wanted to make sure you were okay, Luna-Luna." Draco nuzzled at her bright blonde hair, more untamed than ever. "I've wanted to ever since the night we saw the mirror."

"Hermione figured out what I saw," Luna mumbled. "Did she tell you?"

"She didn't have to," Draco sighed. "Luna, just because you saw *him* doesn't mean that-"

"What *does* it mean?" Luna breathed, pulling back with her pretty blue eyes plaintive. They were slightly swollen, like she had been crying earlier in the day, but no longer. "Because any way I try and work it out, Frankenstein, it just doesn't..."

"Do you want to tell me," Draco asked softly, feeling his secret guilt swell up, "Exactly what you saw? It might... I don't know if you told Hermione." She shook her head. "It might help."

"We didn't even say the name," Luna said softly, "But yes, it was Tom. We were at the Heart of Winter gala, just as it was when I went. It was like he always described to me, in the diary. We were there, we were together, and we were dancing. That's what I saw. Him and me dancing under all the snow and ice."

She seemed reassured to feel Draco cuddle her closer, as if she'd expected him not to want to hug her after hearing. "I thought- Draco, I thought I was *past* this. I banished the Boggart of him. And Neville- he's important to me. Sometimes I think I might love him. But then I see *this*... why would that be my heart's desire? I wanted so much to think the mirror could be wrong... but everyone else's, they make sense. It's just me that... that... is that why I really dumped Neville?"

"You dumped him," Draco said firmly, "Because he stood you up and he was a shitty inattentive boyfriend, Luna, that's all. And now he's being a better boyfriend, so you're back together. I know it might seem like self-sabotage, but that wasn't that. That was Neville's issues there, not you."

She looked close to tears, so much that Draco had to tug at the ends of her matted hair. Then he took up a nearby brush and began to try and work out the tangles, holding it at the roots with one hand so her scalp wouldn't feel the pain of the tugging. "Listen, Luna," Draco said softly. "Luna-Luna. Cousin. Rat Thief Strategist. She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

He nuzzled at the hair he untangled, and his heart lifted a bit as he heard he'd made her giggle, at least. "Maybe it's that you wanted it to be *true*. That he was everything he'd said he was, and that he hadn't been a monster who used you and made you do awful things. It's not like you saw him as he was in the Chamber of Secrets. You saw the fantasy he made. The lie. You saw it coming true. And maybe that's... maybe it's that it would be like taking it all back, all the awful things that happened to you, making it right." Draco bit his lip, trying not to let his voice crack as he said, "Going back in time, almost. Making the bad things never have happened. Redeeming them."

"Oh," Luna said softly, and took his hand. "You don't think it's that I don't really care about Neville? It's that I wish I never got hurt? Never got lied to? Is that why I saw myself as twelve?"

"I don't know," Draco said, and kissed her on the forehead. "I know you're my angel, Luna, and nothing you see in some *mirror* is ever going to change that. And if you think you love Neville, Luna, then you do, you love him. You're the one who knows your own heart."

"I don't, though," Luna sighed, sniffling slightly. "I don't know what I feel. I just feel like everything's a mess, and I'm not- I'm never going to be fit to be in a real relationship. That mirror was just *proof* I really am loony. Too crazy for Neville- too crazy to ever have a real love-"

"Luna," Draco said firmly, finishing his rather heroic work untangling her hair. "Now let's braid your hair, put on your parure, and let's go see Neville and wish him Happy Christmas. And then you can see what you have in your heart. I don't think it's going to be what you fear, okay?"

Luna nodded bravely, and let him braid her hair while she put on her Sleeping Beauty necklace, with the matching pair of spiral turquoise earrings he'd made her this Christmas: what he pretentiously called her parure already, with the hope of many birthdays and Christmases to come to add more matching pieces.

I can't die too soon, can I? I'm not completely dispensable after all. I need at least to finish Luna's parure before I bite it.

"I love you, Luna," Draco said with a sigh. "I hate it when you doubt yourself. I know why the mirror scared you. But you can't just automatically think the worst of yourself-"

"I just feel like an imposter," Luna said, eyes downcast. Draco's chest stung with a vicarious slash through it. "Like I'm pretending to be some normal student, who can have a boyfriend and be with good people like I'm one of them, when I don't belong anywhere..."

"Luna," Draco said firmly, tying off her braid. "Look at me. What you are, I am. Whatever it is, we're the same. The exact same. If you're an imposter, I am. But if you're real, then I'm real. You can't have one without the other, we're a set. A pair. Like a mirror. You're my mirror, Luna, and I'm yours. Not the Mirror of Erised. So what should *I* see when I look in the mirror?"

Luna's blue eyes focused on him. "My favorite cousin. He's clever," she said unhesitatingly, "And brave and strong and true. And sweet and lovely and wonderful-"

"Well," Draco said with a grin, "That's what I'd say about my favorite cousin too. Sounds like we're in agreement!"

He had kept Luna from crying, and she was even giggling as they went down the stairs hand in hand, only to stop cold at the sound of a great tumbling *crash*.

It thudded through the Burrow, making the very walls shake to their foundations. Thankfully, the place did not fall apart over their heads. But it felt a close thing.

Draco and Luna followed the others, running into the cold. Harry was standing beside the Minister of Magic and a great tall tree that had fallen, the weaker of its bare black branches lying broken in the snow. The vast toppled mass of its roots where they had been wrenched from the ground loomed taller than any human thrice over. In the distance, there were several garden gnomes fleeing for the cornfields, soon disappearing inside them.

Harry was breathing hard with a face like thunder, though neither had their wands drawn. Somehow, Scrimgeour was the one with a look on his face like he was guilty.

"Accidental magic," Scrimgeour said to the people who had run out panicked at the sound, no inconsiderable crowd: Sirius, Remus, Neville, Fleur, Mr. Lovegood, Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Bill, Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, and even *Percy* Weasley now, with Draco and Luna at the back, Draco soon pushing forward. He looked none too happy to have a large group witness this scene, as if the tree betrayed a crime *he* had committed, Verniculpa upsized. "Not rare in minors, to be sure. Even if they are... sixteen is it, Mr. Potter? Well, from a wizard of your power..."

"You knocked down the *tree*?" Ron called. "Without even meaning to? Just from getting angry? Like when you blew up your aunt that time?" Ron ran forward, instinctively putting himself between Harry and Scrimgeour, though it didn't look like it was Scrimgeour he was worried about. "Cor, Harry, what happened? I thought you two just went out to take a walk in the garden..."

Draco ran forward too, with Luna trying to follow. Neville caught her and held her back, eyes fearful, while Remus took a place at Harry's side, grasping his shoulder and whispering quietly into his ear. Sirius stepped up beside Ron, in the way of Harry and any threat. Meanwhile, Percy made his more cautious way towards Scrimgeour, who was unharmed but certainly ruffled by the burst of magic Harry had let out, snow splattered all over him. He stepped aside from Percy's fussy attempts to wipe and pat him dry, looking absently repulsed by him.

Arthur Weasley stepped forward with much the same face as he had worn when Draco had been being accused of casting the Dark Mark. "We invited you into our home, Minister. On Christmas Day. Because you said Percy wanted to visit his family. What have you been speaking of with Harry Potter in our garden?"

Scrimgeour said nothing, then seemed to recover some composure, swatting Percy aside entirely. Only Fred and George were not too caught up with tension to exchange a small smirk and snicker at observing that. "Oh, not much. Only the situation, you know, with the Ministry and..."

"He wanted me to 'stand alongside the Ministry'," Harry said, voice coming out so low and husky it sent a shiver down Draco's spine. The always-sharp scent of Harry's magic was so thick in the air, it almost felt stifling, curling around all of them in the aftermath of a burst, only made stronger after an explosion. "Talk them up, put on a show, make it look like they were working to fight Voldemort, when they're *not.* He wanted to know if I'm *the Chosen One.* Or no, whether *Dumbledore* thinks I'm the Chosen One. He wanted to know what Dumbledore's been doing, where he goes, what he's 'up to'. And when I wouldn't tell him, he told me he'd..."

"Did you," Molly Weasley snapped, "*Minister*, come into *my home* and threaten Harry Potter?"

"Did you," Sirius growled, voice lower and still more deadly, "Threaten my *son*?"

"Sirius," Remus said firmly, "He's safe now. Put your wand away." Draco couldn't see if Sirius obeyed.

They all seemed to find this far worse than Harry's accidental magic. Even if Harry hardly looked calmed in the wake of it. Quite the contrary. Remus gave Draco a careful wordless glance. He stepped up to Harry's other side. Harry seized his hand with a desperation he didn't understand.

"He said," Harry growled, "That it was clear I'm Dumbledore's man, and that I'm 'a good young lad' but I have *bad influences* on me. That Dumbledore was one thing, but that the *other* company I keep- the people that he says I've been *unlucky enough* to land up with as my *family*-" He turned on Scrimgeour with his green eyes flashing blue-hot fire. He looked as if he wished the burst of magic had taken Scrimgeour down as fully as the tree. "He said my new adopted brother is a bad influence, and that Draco's lucky that the Ministry hadn't chosen to investigate the death of Nott in more detail."

Draco was suddenly glad he hadn't admitted to Remus what he and Severus had seen in the Pensieve. "Harry, it's alright. I wasn't exactly trying to make any friends, when we met him at Slughorn's party. I was being reckless, it's my fault. Minister, I have my views, but Harry has his own mind-"

"Does he?" Scrimgeour hissed, unable to contain himself even then, and Harry turned to the onlookers with a renewed savagery.

"He said," Harry said in a voice like murder, "That the Ministry's generosity towards my 'paramour brother' had been for *my* sake, but that clemency could be revoked." Remus could be heard urging Sirius to put his wand away again. "And-" Harry bit his lip, looking somewhere between bursting into tears and bursting into magic that would floor every tree around the Burrow. "He said that Sirius and Remus had done wrong, adopting Draco. That they had disrespected the memory of those who were lost in the first war. And he- he said that me being with someone like Draco, like- like we are- that I was disrespecting the memory of my parents and the sacrifice they made for me. That my parents would be ashamed for me to be their son now."

There were gasps, with Ron staring at Scrimgeour hatefully. "Bloody hell, did you really say that? *Minister*?" Any natural deference to authority seemed gone in face of such words. Scrimgeour didn't deny it, shame mixed with loathing on his aged gaunt face. "Percy, are you *smirking*-"

"Well, the Minister's right," said Percy, and Ron hauled back and punched Percy in the face.

It was mayhem after that, Remus the calm head running forward and pulling Scrimgeour out of the line of fire. He was soon completely occupied, though, in getting his apoplectic husband under control, who seemed likely to be far more dangerous to their visitors than any Weasley children. Frank and Alice, who had been the slowest coming out of the house, grasped the situation quickly enough to help Remus with containing the uncontainable. Without their intervention, Remus alone might not have been enough to keep Sirius back.

Meanwhile, Mr. Weasley tried to get Ron off Percy. The difficulty was that even with Ron subdued, Ginny took up his cause. She lunged at Percy just as ferociously, screaming her head off with Fred and George roaring out their approval behind her.

"They call us blood traitors," Ron was gasping as Mr. Weasley held him back, "But you, Percy, you- you're the traitor-"

Scrimgeour Disapparated without Percy. Not without a frazzled little speech, though, indicating that he hoped they could forget all of what had happened today, that he certainly would- read, no Aurors would be coming after Ron- and he solemnly wished them a Happy Christmas.

Percy was not slow to join him, fleeing headlong from Ginny, who pursued him with her fist raised and wand drawn.

After the second crack out, Remus went over to Harry. He was breathing slower, but there was the smell of his magic in the air, more fury waiting to be unleashed. In the background, Ron and Ginny were receiving a hero's welcome from their siblings, up to and including Bill. Mrs. Weasley gave them the most cursory scolding imaginable, not seeming to have the heart for it. Then she lowered her voice, turning for an anxious bout of whispering with Sirius and the Longbottoms. Luna was using Vulnera satentur as Draco had taught to close the bleeding skin of Ron's busted knuckles, while Neville watched in admiration.

"I don't," Harry took a deep breath, shaking off Remus's touch. "I don't know if I can control it- I'm so, so angry-"

"Draco," Remus called, going over to conference with the Order. "Take Harry back to Grimmauld."

The Weasleys protested. But they seemed grateful the threat to the Burrow was being removed. Draco nodded and took Harry's arm. He used Side-Along Apparition to deposit them in his bedroom at Grimmauld, only then remembering he was still technically not allowed to Apparate. Well, he didn't think any of the Weasleys or Longbottoms would tell on him. He had greater worries. He hoped his beautiful room would survive Harry's uncontrolled rage, for one. It was just his imagination, but he thought his poster of Ian Wright looked distinctly more nervous than usual.

Harry began to pace, steps over silver carpet thudding as loudly as if it was hard wood. There was the distinct fire-gold fizz of magic visible at his fingertips, as beautiful as it was frightening. If Scrimgeour had justified his aspersions against Draco with Draco's 'young Dark Lord in training' reputation- well, Harry was the one who looked like more of a Dark Lord now.

Draco sat on the edge of his bed. He could not believe Harry had so terrified the Minister of Magic. Nor could he believe Harry in this state had let him off as lightly as he had, after what he had said about his parents. Draco knew what it did to Harry, hearing them spoken ill of, and what Scrimgeour had *said*-

"Harry, you know your parents wouldn't be ashamed, don't you? Of Sirius and Remus, or of you. If I'm not worthy- of your kindness- that's to your *credit*, yours and theirs. That you've still been so kind anyway- that you saw something good in me, even if I haven't ever deserved it-"

"You've deserved it." Harry turned to face him with the agitation so alive on his face, it was hard not to instinctively shy away. "And I know my parents wouldn't be ashamed I'm not *straight*. They thought the way Sirius and Remus do. Not just about sex, too- about good and evil. About people. So- if they accept us, my parents would have, wouldn't they?"

Despite the confidence Harry put in his voice, Draco could see his shimmering hands shake. "Yes, Harry, you're right."

"I know that. It's just when someone talks about them like that, I can't handle it, I get so angry- he said they'd be ashamed- and of you and *me*- I *love* you, Draco, and he said they'd be ashamed-"

"Look at me," Draco said, grabbing both his hands. Harry stopped pacing. "I know how much your parents mean to you."

"And *this* family," Harry said pleadingly. "Me and you and Sirius and Remus. What *we* have. We're not wrong. We're not."

"No, we're not. Harry, it's okay to be angry. I would have done worse. *So* much worse. You know me, you know I would have. But Scrimgeour's not going to go after Ron, it's over. Just try and calm down for *me,* okay? Because it's just you and me."

"Will he go after you?" Harry's eyes widened in abject fear. "Are you going to be in trouble because of me? We were fighting the Death Eaters, fighting for our lives- are they going to punish you because I won't help them? I don't want you to be sent away to Azkaban-"

Draco's stomach dropped, but he had to keep it together for Harry. Neville's voice in his head was telling him like it so often did, *You're the one who makes us feel brave.*

"I don't want them to take you away from me," Harry gasped miserably, and kissed Draco in one hard blow. They had the taste of wild magic between them.

"Kiss me again," Draco ordered. Harry climbed onto the bed and pushed Draco down onto his back. Then he kissed him like he would never get the chance to touch him again. The nervous desperation was palpable, unsteady like he hadn't been since the first few times they kissed, like it would be his last chance to ever feel Draco beneath him.

"Harry, it's okay," Draco tried to say. Harry moaned and knotted both hands in Draco's hair, feeling at him like he needed to prove Draco was real. "They *can't* get me for Nott, the inquest was formally shut, there's double jeopardy, it's just a bluff-"

"Really?" Harry breathed. Draco took Harry's glasses off, putting them aside, and then it felt like casting a wall of fire, the way those green eyes took hold of him and wouldn't let him go.

"Really," Draco said, and pulled him down into another rough kiss. Harry's lips virtually sizzled against his, with all the uncontrolled magic lingering in his skin like static electricity. Harry tasted like Amortentia, like power, like everything Draco wanted. He couldn't get enough, the others dropping away from his mind as he became more and more aware of the weight of Harry on top of him, of the tug of Harry's hands in his hair...

When Harry yanked his head back to dig his teeth into his neck, Draco moaned so loud his voice cracked. He rubbed against Harry and found them both more than responsive, frantic tremor not abating. "Harry," Draco moaned, "Don't *worry*, love, don't," and Harry just poured himself into the touch, need for reassurance unabated.

"They can't," Harry breathed as if trying to convince himself. "They can't take you away from me."

"They can't," Draco agreed. He watched Harry's pupils dilate, something addictively feral in the stare. "Do you know why?"

"Because I won't let them?" Harry rubbed his hips down.

"Because *I* won't," Draco laughed, arching like a cat and clinging to Harry. He wanted Harry all over him, not just the surface but everywhere, down to the *marrow*. "Because I can kill anyone who tries. You know I can."

"You can, dragon," Harry agreed, voice hitching. When his fingers went to pull off Draco's shirt and jumper, Draco let him, hands going for Harry's clothes too. He kissed Harry after each thing taken off, each bit more of bare skin melting against each other's with another press of their lips.

"I love you so much," Harry said simply. "You're brilliant."

"And powerful?" Draco breathed, licking his lips at Harry bare above him, at the effect *he* had on Harry, what Harry had ready for him...

"Yes. You're so powerful."

"Not as powerful as *you*."

Harry's darkened green eyes seemed to see Draco to the core. It was past pleasure, almost agony to feel this close to someone, and from zero to a hundred, so forcefully. So impossible to detach, like it was risking their magic to be knit together as one...

"Yeah," Harry laughed, "*More* powerful," and ran his hand down Draco. "Draco... God, can I..."

"It's been a year," Draco said in a rush, any last vestige of resistance crumbling, because he had listened to Remus, he *had*, but it had been so *long*. He couldn't wait any longer. He felt like he would crumble apart if he tried, too empty and incomplete to be endured. "It's been a year since the mistletoe, since we first kissed when we wanted to- Harry, I'm sure, I'm sure it's you. I love you, I'm sure it's you I want to be with, only ever you- are you?"

"Yes," Harry said, eyes unflinching. He pressed a hard kiss to the dragon-shaped birthmark on Draco's shoulder. "Yes, it's you. It's always you, dragon. It always will be. You or nothing."

"Then let's not wait anymore. I want you."

"You want..."

Draco shuddered beneath Harry from how badly he wanted.

"I want you to fuck me," Draco whispered, and Harry smiled.

"Really?" he whispered back. Draco kissed him, so binding it felt like a spell. Harry's magic was so close to the surface. "I want to. Please, can I..."

It was the best feeling in the world. They'd talked it about, the way it would be, how they would do it, but Draco had somehow never thought Harry would really want to in the end. But if Harry was lying to Draco, or to himself about his feelings or intentions or any of that, he was leaving it rather late to discover the truth.

"Yes! Too late," Draco hissed victoriously. "It's too late, I'll *have* you, you'll be mine, Harry. I'll be the first one to feel you in me. Me and no one else. I'm the one you'll always have to remember. And you- you'll be *my* first." Harry grinned ecstatically at that part, impulsive and haphazard as Draco's words sounded to his own ears. "This is it, Harry, this is irrevocable. After this- no letting go. Not ever. Never letting go-"

"Never letting go," Harry agreed, and kissed Draco until Draco had to let him go, so eager to cast the spells they needed.

Draco pushed Harry's hands aside, drew his wand, and said the spells all at once. "Purificintra. Rosulatractus. Inlubrico." Harry could hear, and from the way his lips parted, it seemed he recognized them. Then Draco pulled his hand back down and let him feel.

"Draco," Harry gasped in shaking wonder. "*Draco*."

"'Harry'," Draco echoed, "See, I know your name too," and smirked as Harry rolled his eyes at him. Except when Harry's fingers curled, Draco's eyes nearly rolled back in his head.

"You're wet," Harry whispered, and his voice shuddered then, wracked by unbearable heat. "You- you got yourself *wet* for me."

"And open," Draco added, trying to arch and draw Harry's fingers deeper inside. "I'm open for you, see? Already. So you can *fit* in me. See? See?"

"You're so, so, so good at those spells," Harry babbled inanely. "You're good at every spell, you can even cast the Disillusionment Charm now..."

Draco had the vague feeling then that he was lying or omitting something, but whatever had been for him before, in the distant past, was not only irrelevant but too unimportant for his body to even remember. All that was real was the past month he had lived, or less than that,

weeks or a week or less still, days where Harry was all he ever had wanted and would ever want.

"I've cast them on myself," he said truthfully. "Before, just by myself- I've been doing a lot this past month, after it got cold outside, I've been- using my fingers, when I think of you- think of it like they're yours- makes me warm-"

"*Draco*. You shouldn't- shouldn't have *without* me..."

"Well, you'd better make up for lost time, before I decide I'm- mmm, better off without you." Draco squirmed on Harry's fingers. "Show me- show me what I need *you* to do to me, Harry, go on, you'll see, it's so warm, you won't want to stop..."

Harry's fingers slid out and Draco moaned in frustration, only to feel all his insides spasm at the sight of Harry taking himself in hand. "Come on, put it in," Draco whined, letting his wrists fall above his head, trying to look as submissive as possible. "Yeah, that's right, just-"

The tip of Harry rubbed against Draco, dragging over the rim and rubbing between the slick puckered skin like it was trying to swallow him in. It was nothing like just by himself. It almost hurt there, like there was a throbbing needy place in him begging to be touched, to be pressed again and again until he could need less badly. Any physical pain from being split open and stretched out on Harry would be nothing compared to this pain of *lack*. "It's dripping out on me," Harry breathed. "Draco, can I- I want- now-"

"Now," Draco agreed, "Now," and Harry touched his face with his other hand, expression all tenderness.

"You love me, don't you?" Harry asked, real insecurity in his voice still.

"Yes, I love you, and you love me," Draco whined, throwing his head back in despair. "So now, Harry- HARRY!"

Harry pierced into Draco with his lips and green eyes smiling, gazes locked as their bodies locked into place too. It was awkward at first, Harry trying to find the right angle to get deeper with each bit, breathlessly asking Draco if he was alright every step of the way. Draco kept saying impatiently he *was*, lifting his legs to try and pull Harry deeper, or at least keep him in him.

When Harry asked if it hurt, Draco lied and said it didn't. It didn't really, the blunt ache of being stretched wider and wider almost imperceptible, compared to the satisfaction of that stretch, that warmth permeating, pressure driving deeper inside to where he needed it. An itch he just couldn't scratch by himself, taken in hand by someone else. "Put it all in," Draco whined, not caring how shameless and debased he must seem in Harry's eyes. "I want to feel all of you. Wanna feel how big you are- want you so bad..."

Harry's strong hips jolted, driving the rest of his length into Draco as commanded. He laughed at the feeling of Draco's black nails catching on his back, probably leaving marks as Draco thrashed beneath him. "Some things... don't change," Harry laughed breathlessly. Draco leaned up and bit at his lower lip.

"Don't you want me? Doesn't it feel good? *Move!*"

"Okay, just- you were right, dragon, you're so warm here, it's like- like a furnace, and so- so *wet*-" Draco tensed around him, squeezing all the muscles in his arse and hips and thighs. Harry's voice broke off, strangled. "I'm just trying so hard not to come right away," he confessed. That made Draco grin too, despite the agitation that arousal wreaked in him.

"Will it help," Draco laughed, "If I scratch your back harder?"

"Can't hurt," Harry said, a figure of speech for an action which, objectively, hurt. When Draco's nails scraped back up, pressing vindictively into the larger swells of muscle over his shoulder blades, Harry's hips finally moved, pulling half out before letting his weight fall again. "Did that hurt you?"

"Did *this* hurt *you*?" Draco hissed. He tried to pull *Harry's* hair for once, while Harry laughed, elated and disbelieving. "Fuck me properly, or I swear to Sala- to Merlin, Harry, I'll bind *you* down with Manibipiscatus, and make you *watch* while I give *myself* what I need-"

"Tell me if I hurt you."

Harry braced his hands on Draco's shoulders, eyes a dreamy green flash of light as he began to move, dragging across Draco's vision and leaving spots there like a set of bright lights. Harry's lightning scar showed in flashes, as his sweaty dark hair fell across his forehead and trailed about, lips swollen from kissing hungry to take in more kisses. Draco kissing him was another wet dirty slapping sound in the air, with his teeth useful to drag Harry down faster each time he pumped in, nails and lips and then his heels curling up over Harry's calves, then up to his hips, planting and rolling up to help build momentum between them.

Draco's hips tilted back further, a bodily ache he didn't register at all. The angle made Harry's next hungry thrust drive *right* where Draco wanted, just right, the spot that made his legs shake uncontrollably and his cock pulse and swell even more. Draco reached down to rub at himself, and Harry let out a growl and shoved his hands away, moving them to his back and taking Draco in hand himself. Harry was harsh, slow and then fast at the wrong times, jerky and uncoordinated at doing two things at once that he had never done to someone else.

But all he had to really do was just move against that spot and Draco was *gone*, sparks fizzing in his thighs, bracing his flexed toes against the wall and screaming. It was so good he thought he was coming in Harry's hand, but that wasn't even the best part, not yet orgasm but building towards it, a wave of intensity from being on the edge. There was still higher to ride this out.

"Love you," Harry panted, and Draco felt so much sweat drip down it made his eyes sting. He had to blink it away, because he couldn't let his eyes themselves water, even if the thrum of his body each time Harry rocked in threatened that too- couldn't let Harry think he'd made him *cry*-

"Can I- Draco, I'm gonna," Harry forced out, and it was lucky Draco knew him so well. He knew exactly what he meant.

"Come in me," Draco gasped, and squeezed around Harry. Harry *howled*, feet planting and driving in one last harshest time, before he seemed to grow bigger yet inside Draco, then shoot out sticky and hot, starting to fill Draco with his seed. Draco tried to touch himself, and even in the wave of coming, Harry still instinctively pushed his hands away.

Harry's hands went and pinned Draco's wrists above his head and Draco was coming without a touch on him. The pressure on his wrists was enough, that last bit that made him spill too- that and Harry dripping out more and more into him, young and strong and so potent, supply seeming virtually endless, throwing the smell of salt into the air. Draco kissed Harry until they had both stopped coming, both mouths open and clumsy, but fond, so fond...

Draco couldn't breathe for some time after, couldn't *think*. His body felt like it was coming again in random spurts now and then, jolting or spark-fizz aftershocks in his core or his toes, arms gone from over his head to wrapped around Harry again. Harry had fallen on him, mumbling his name, and then had the presence of mind to turn them on their sides. Draco, for one, had not been overly displeased by letting Harry's weight crush him.

"Was that..." Harry finally asked, that boundless insecurity somehow right back in his voice again. "Was that alright? Was I- was I enough for you, dragon?"

"The dragon," Draco panted out, "Has been slayed."

He was rewarded by a snort of laughter, and a grin that seemed to finally understand the stupidity of the question.

New Year's Eve, when 1996 turned to 1997, the year where Dumbledore died and Hogwarts fell. At the moment, the only thing falling was Draco, onto Harry's lap with breathless laughter, trying to goad Harry into more than they were doing already, Harry's fingers finding him already wet and prepared for him. They had in truth accomplished little else since their first time other than experimenting with their newfound freedom with each other. But after all, Harry did consider New Year's Eve their anniversary. Better than the day Cantankerous Nott had died, even if that was when they had really taken the step to *dating*.

None of the days before, not even the first time, had anything on today, Harry's fingers driving up inside him, three to the knuckles, making Draco's head sag onto Harry's shoulder and his thighs tremble where they were straddling his fully clothed boyfriend. Being naked with Harry still dressed was frustrating in the most immediate sense, but white-hot in a more secret one. Draco hadn't stopped being sore there for an *instant* since Harry first had him, with Harry far more solicitous of not overtiring Draco than Draco was himself. But even if Harry was a gentleman and wouldn't go all the way today, he would still let Draco have his fingers with enough pouting and whining, already getting more skillful at finding Draco's spot and making him come apart on his lap.

Draco was squirming and clenching around Harry's fingers, letting Harry leave bites on his neck that they would have to spell away, when Remus called, "Boys, are you both in here?"

"Bloody hell!" Harry groaned. At the sound of Sirius calling as well- more of a note of amusement in his voice than Remus's- he gently pushed Draco off his lap and tried to pull himself into some semblance of composure. That took longer than it did for Draco to get dressed, but eventually, they were presentable to open the door to Sirius and Remus. Draco's uncles looked like they still had no illusion as to what they'd likely interrupted, but there was enough indulgence there not to fear.

What was more frightening was their reason for coming there midday, hours before their second New Year's Eve party at Grimmauld. That seemed like it would become the tradition, if normal life continued with enough of them alive after the war: Christmas at the Burrow, New Year's Eve here. But Remus was immediately taking Draco elsewhere. For once, Sirius professed himself eager to give Harry dueling lessons, which should have been sufficient lure. But Harry proved suspicious when Remus wouldn't even tell him where he was going to Apparate himself and Draco off to.

"It's just citadel business," Remus said gently, "Nothing to worry about, darling," and Harry looked dubious but followed Sirius into the 'dueling room' anyway.

Draco's disquiet only increased when their destination indeed proved to be the citadel. Remus hadn't lied, but what was more worrisome was the secrecy, and the separation of him from Harry, as if to make it easier to punish a criminal. There were so *many* things he could lay on his conscience that Remus could have found out. There was his recent *full* intimacy with Harry, to start, and the theft of the Mirror of Erised not long before that. There was the story about Nott trying to kill Sirius, which Draco's questioning of Remus might have prompted them to look into and somehow find was now a lie.

Would Sirius and Remus turn him over to *Dumbledore*, if they knew some of that?

Or he was just a self-absorbed bastard, and something bad had happened to someone he cared about- Ron, Luna, Dobby, Hermione- except then Harry would be nearly as involved- but if it was *Severus*-

"What's going *on*?" Draco grabbed onto Remus's sleeve.

Remus shook him off with a smile and called, "Aberforth!"

Well. At least, as the crabby and shabby-looking old man wandered into view from behind some other dilapidated ruins, Draco knew which of his iniquities he would have to answer for.

Except Aberforth made a pretense of meeting him for the first time, and Remus didn't seem to question it. "I know who Draco Black is," Aberforth said gruffly. "I read the papers, me. And he gave an awfully grandiose speech in the Hog's Head once." Remus gave him a look of bright interest, far more comfortable there in the snow-dusted rubble than anyone else. "About how Harry Potter was a god or something, I didn't listen too closely. Is he the one who's going to convince me?"

"Not exactly," Remus said, putting a paternal arm around Draco's shoulders, as if beaming with pride to show off his clever son to this ostensible stranger. "Draco, meet Aberforth

Dumbledore."

"I've heard of him too," Draco said, and extended a hand already going cold. Remus produced gloves he'd brought for him afterwards. But before then, he had to feel Aberforth's bare rough old wrinkled palm against his, far colder. At least Remus had gloves, improbably enough, for Aberforth too.

"Kind of you," Aberforth muttered, looking more resentful than anything to accept the kindness.

"You know Aberforth is the owner of the Hog's Head," Remus explained, "But what you don't know is that there is a secret passage between his pub and the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts. A passage that could prove quite vital in the evacuation of Hogwarts, should that day ever come."

It would probably come sooner than Remus would like to think. "No, I had no idea," Draco lied, making sure not to put too much effort into the lie, and not look Remus straight in the eyes. He had scarcely ever met a person harder to lie to. Sirius would have been much easier. "The evacuation? If Voldemort attacks, you mean. To get the students out."

"Sirius Black came to visit me yesterday," Aberforth explained more tersely. "I knew him a bit in his student days- saw all your lot in the Hog's Head now and then, up to no good. Can't say I'm mourning the rat one, though. Never liked him." Remus and Draco gave twin polite strained smiles, while Draco's mind reeled, far dumber than usual as he tried to calculate why Aberforth was actually here, seeming almost *sober*, if not to help his guardians catch him as the mirror thief for Dumbledore-

But of course Aberforth wouldn't help Dumbledore, he hated him- Draco remembered something in those lurid posthumous Skeeter articles about Dumbledore getting punched by Aberforth at their sister's funeral-

Aberforth was talking on while Draco tried to think, telling of how Sirius had come to see him in hopes of his assistance in any evacuation through Hogsmeade, and how Aberforth had told him of the passage. "Not that I trust Albus," Aberforth said defensively. "But if it makes hundreds of schoolchildren less likely to be dead..."

Aberforth apparently had lingering doubts, though, that kept him from fully endorsing this new partnership. Chiefly, it was the destination *from* the Hog's Head, by pre-made Portkeys to be activated in batches of students: the citadel, of course, where they were currently shivering. "You say you've been working hard rebuilding," Aberforth observed caustically, "But from where I'm standing- and I've gotten the bloody tour, thanks to that Lockhart- this place looks hardly any better than a warzone for children."

"And as I said, myself and Sirius-" Remus began patiently.

"Just two people."

"Frank and Alice Longbottom-"

"Great. Just two more people, fresh out the loony bin."

Draco opened his mouth to protest that characterization. But Remus gave a look that kept him silent. "And there's Gilderoy Lockhart, whom you've met."

From the way Aberforth scoffed, that had hurt rather than helped their cause. "Oh, yes, now that you've entrusted the new school to *that* one, there's no way it *won't* be done in time." He turned to Draco with a rare, albeit quite biting humor in his piercing eyes. "Did you know he's named the gargoyles after the Hogwarts professors?" Some satisfaction crept into his voice as he added, "The Albus one has half a wing missing."

Gilderoy seemed to have been put well out of the way of Aberforth, after failing to impress. If he hadn't been strictly told to stay away, he probably would have been bounding out to chatter inanely at Draco already. "At least he has the gargoyles working," Draco said with a shrug. "Hey, I know that he *seems* like a prancing peacock..." That Christmas fur couldn't have helped that impression.

"And yeah, I know it *seems* he'd be more useful to the Order's cause if we chopped him up and sold him for meat." Aberforth's snort then was encouraging, though Remus looked appalled. "But he does castle-building well enough to make the worst vampires on the planet keep him alive for *years.* If that doesn't show-"

"And that's *all* they kept him alive for," Aberforth put in dryly. "*Castle-building*."

Draco hated his rush of instinctive protectiveness then, but he couldn't help it. "You don't know anything about it, so hold your tongue!" *Lest I render it less* useful *to you.*

Aberforth snorted louder, eyebrows going up behind his spectacles. "Draco," Remus inserted himself helpfully, "Has been working with Gilderoy on the Order's behalf. He's sworn an Unbreakable Vow to Draco, which secures his loyalty. If you have doubts, Draco can best address them. I'm sure he'll be glad to offer you any reassurances you need. Sweetheart, why don't you finish off Aberforth's tour? I don't think he's seen the observatory yet. I'll go check on Gilderoy."

The observatory scarcely justified the name. It had only been immediately obvious what it was based on the old map plans Gilderoy had found of the citadel, and the presence of mysterious old glass instruments and empty shelves that matched the written descriptions of the stone sphere, once higher than the library tower but fallen. The gargoyles had unearthed enough of it for the word DANTANIAN to be visible above the open entrance, whatever door that had been there long rotted away. Aberforth stopped to stare at the word, and Draco's chest spiked with raw nauseating panic.

"It's the name of the founder of Citadelle Xaphan," Draco said quickly, "Dantanian Black," and led Aberforth in before he could think on it overlong. "So anyway, I know Gilderoy comes off as-"

"You've been spending too much time with that chirping canary," Aberforth interrupted, "If you think I'm really here to talk to you about *him*."

Draco could barely see the observatory around them, heartbeat pounding in his ears like the drums of fate. The round room was all filth and muck and shadow, as neither of them cared to cast any substantial light. He nearly knocked into one of the mysteriously intact dusty contraptions scattered across the obsidian floor, and finally found his back against the one remaining door, a flat obsidian slab with cryptic words on it that nothing and no one seemed able to open. "Are you going to turn me in-" Or blackmail him, that would be honestly better, but-

"Have you misjudged me that much? I had too high an opinion of you, it seems," Aberforth scoffed, and tried to sit on one of the necks of the machines. He nearly lost his spectacles stumbling back off. He took the role Draco usually did with his friends, casting warming charms in the small black and gold space that already protected them from the wind. Then he cast a shield that sealed off the one source of light, the hole in the ceiling where some variety of telescope must have once extended. His last spells were charms to prevent anyone from entering or overhearing, different from those Draco used, with Draco so overwrought inside he barely processed the words.

"I am here to make sure I'll be doing the right thing," Aberforth said bluntly, "Entrusting all of the evacuation to my brother. But that's not about this castle, that was just an excuse to meet with you before spring term starts. I couldn't risk an OWL or the like, but- if I am to work with the Order, I need to know there is at least one person there who will question Albus, who will not blindly follow him to whatever ends he deems *for the greater good*. You are a wizard- if not of great age, and perhaps not of any great wisdom- that remains to be seen- but at least, I am sure, a wizard of power. But power is not enough. You need clarity, if you are to be the one I can trust. You have to understand the nature of the beast."

"I do," Draco said, confident with relief, "Trust me," and Aberforth laughed in his face.

"Then you're a worse fool than your pet canary. I knew my brother, Potter. He learned secrecy at our mother's knee. Secrets and lies, that's how we grew up, and Albus... he was a natural. He's been keeping secrets so long, I don't think he tells the truth to *himself*. Let alone anyone else."

"I know more about him than you might think."

"Do you?" Aberforth snorted mirthlessly. "Let me tell you a story, then. You must already know it, if you want to say you understand a thing. Listen, boy, if you can. When my sister was six years old, she was attacked, set upon, by three Muggle boys. No, this is important, I have to go this far back, *listen.* They'd seen her doing magic, spying through the back garden hedge: she was a kid, she couldn't control it, no witch or wizard can at that age. What they saw scared them, I expect. They forced their way through the hedge, and when she couldn't show them the trick, they got a bit carried away trying to stop the little freak doing it."

"I'm sorry," Draco said, and Aberforth ignored him like he was barely present, caught distantly in a tale he must have gone over a thousand times in his own head. Even though rarely, if ever, giving it *voice.*

"It destroyed her, what they did: she was never right again. She wouldn't use magic, but she couldn't get rid of it: it turned inwards and drove her mad, it exploded out of her when she

couldn't control it, and at times she was strange and dangerous. But mostly she was sweet, and scared, and harmless. And my father went after the bastards that did it, and attacked them."

Draco didn't think he should interrupt, but he had to then. "*Good*," he said with vindictive satisfaction.

"They locked him up in Azkaban for it," Aberforth remarked sardonically.

Draco flinched. "Not so good."

"No," Aberforth laughed grimly, "Not so good. But he never said why he'd done it, because if the Ministry had known what Ariana had become, she'd have been locked up in St Mungo's for good. They'd have seen her as a serious threat to the International Statute of Secrecy, unbalanced like she was, with magic exploding out of her at moments when she couldn't keep it in any longer. We had to keep her safe, and quiet. We moved house, put it about she was ill, and my mother looked after her, and tried to keep her calm and happy."

"You loved her," Draco observed carefully, "Even with what she was. Her limits. You loved her anyway."

"She was my favorite, of course," Aberforth said wistfully, "And I was hers, of course. Albus, he was always up in his bedroom when he was home, reading his books and counting his prizes, keeping up with his correspondence with 'the most notable magical names of the day'. He didn't want to be bothered with her. She liked me best. I could get her to eat when she wouldn't do it for my mother, I could get her to calm down when she was in one of her rages, and when she was quiet, she used to help me feed the goats.

"Then, when she was fourteen... see, I wasn't there. If I'd been there, I could have calmed her down. She had one of her rages, and my mother wasn't as young as she was, and... it was an accident. Ariana couldn't control it. But my mother was killed."

That part hadn't been in *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore.* Perhaps it gave him and Albus a kind of kinship. *I tortured my mother, and your negligence got her killed. What a pair we make.*

"So that put paid to Albus's trip round the world with little Doge. The pair of them came home for my mother's funeral and then Doge went off on his own, and Albus settled down as head of the family. Ha!"

"I take it," Draco said dryly, looking Aberforth in the eye to show himself unflinching, "That history has held more successful patriarchs."

Aberforth smiled through a misery on his face now, and Draco realized that Aberforth liked his sense of humor, perhaps even found it a comfort. He could make the man fond of him given time, a man this isolated and bitter whose humor so matched his own. That could be useful- cold as the thought was, to think of this poor old soul in terms of utility and nothing else. But it was inevitable, as with Gilderoy. He had his nine names, and he couldn't afford to add any more.

"I'd have looked after her, I told him so, I didn't care about school, I'd have stayed home and done it. He told me I had to finish my education and he'd take over from my mother. Bit of a comedown for Mr. Brilliant, there's no prizes for looking after your half-mad sister, stopping her blowing up the house every other day. But he did all right for a few weeks... till *he* came."

"Grindelwald?" Draco guessed, and Aberforth looked impressed.

"Yes. It was him then. Gellert bloody Grindelwald."

"Love at first sight?" Draco quipped.

The surprise on Aberforth's face was keener then, seeing Draco knew not just of the relationship but of its nature. "So it seemed. As gone on you as that Potter boy is, Black, I can assure you, it wasn't the half of Albus with *Grindelwald.* You see, at last, my brother had an equal to talk to, someone just as bright and talented as he was. And looking after Ariana took a back seat then, while they were hatching all their plans for a new wizarding order, and looking for Hallows, and whatever else it was they were so interested in. Grand plans for the benefit of all wizardkind, and if one young girl got neglected, what did that matter, when Albus was working for the greater good?

"But after a few weeks of it, I'd had enough, I had. It was nearly time for me to go back to Hogwarts, so I told 'em, both of 'em, face to face." Draco could hear in Aberforth's voice that they had arrived at the pointy end. He might have tried to pat a different man's shoulder. "I told him, you'd better give it up, now. You can't move her, she's in no fit state, you can't take her with you, wherever it is you're planning to go, when you're making your clever speeches, trying to whip yourselves up a following. He didn't like that. Grindelwald didn't like that at all. He got angry. He told me what a stupid little boy I was, trying to stand in the way of him and my brilliant brother... didn't I understand, my poor sister wouldn't have to be hidden once they'd changed the world, and led the wizards out of hiding, and taught the Muggles their place?

"And there was an argument... and I pulled out my wand, and he pulled out his, and I had the Cruciatus Curse used on me by my brother's best friend- and Albus was trying to stop him, and then all three of us were dueling, and the flashing lights and the bangs set her off, she couldn't stand it- and I think she wanted to help, but she didn't really know what she was doing, and I don't know which of us did it, it could have been any of us- and she was dead. Gone. Gone forever."

There were tears in those eyes of Aberforth's that were so like Dumbledore's, tears that should have been in Dumbledore's eyes instead. "That's why you punched Dumbledore at the funeral," Draco observed, and Aberforth seemed too drenched in the misery of memory to question how Draco knew that too. He just nodded.

"'Course, Grindelwald scarpered. He had a bit of a track record already, back in his own country, and he didn't want Ariana set to his account too. And Albus was free, wasn't he? Free of the burden of his sister, free to become- whatever it is the world *thinks* he is now. But I know."

"You have to watch the world worship him, as this paragon of virtue," Draco speculated, "Perfect and noble and heroic, while you feel like you're the only one who can see who he really is, and everyone else is blind or stupid or has gone mad." He knew the feeling. He'd used to have it about Harry, of all people. What a pointless grudge he'd held, in comparison to this vast, unclosable wound of the Dumbledores.

"And that's why someone has to question him," Aberforth finished, nodding at his words. "You will, because you do love Potter, don't you? I did hear your speech, at that first meeting of that army you named after my brother. I heard how much you believed in him. You seemed like you'd fight for him. Would you?"

"Of course," Draco said fiercely. It wasn't even a question.

"Even against my brother?"

"*Especially* against him," Draco said earnestly, and made Aberforth laugh again.

"I don't want to see happen to that boy," Aberforth said more quietly, "What happened to my sister. I don't want him to end up like her, for Albus's *greater plans*. I remember his parents when they were students. I didn't *know* them properly, but I remember them. It seems I remember them so clearly. They were so full of life, and promise, and they had such a future they planned. I'm sure they trusted Dumbledore. And he couldn't protect them. Who's to say he's the one fit to make the decisions for their child too?"

"My godfather," Draco admitted in a rush, the pressure of disclosure all on one side loosening his tongue. The vulnerability there, conveniently enough, was real. "Severus Snape. Dumbledore has him doing- a dangerous job-"

"He spies for the Order on Voldemort," Aberforth said curtly. "I'm not that much in the dark."

"I want Severus to stop spying," Draco said intently. "I want Dumbledore to stop *using* him. Because what you said about your sister being unlucky- just getting in the way and happening to die- that's what I'm sure will happen to Severus, if he keeps following Dumbledore's plans. I *know* Severus is dispensable to him. He'll die. And maybe it won't be an accident. Maybe Dumbledore even *wants* it that way." He felt his eyes prickle, hot and itchy, like an image of the future was trying to crawl out and overshadow them.

"You don't have to lie down and take that," Aberforth said fiercely. He withdrew a folded piece of paper from his pocket. "I believe you, Draco Black. And I'll help you. After our first meeting, I paid a visit to an old friend."

"Bathilda Bagshot?" Draco guessed.

"You are more well-informed than you have any right to be." Aberforth looked pleased by that. "She was glad to have me there out of the blue, reminiscing over old times. A doddering old bird, she is. And if I call someone old, you know it's true. But she was kind enough to let me look through old papers and rooms for memorabilia, of times gone by. I turned up something for you, boy. Something of use."

Draco stared down, but Aberforth did not give it to him yet. "If you want to stand up to Albus, you will need more than a fearsome reputation and a puppeteer's control of the Potter family jewels." Draco must have made a face then, because Aberforth cautioned, "No, brag not of your dark magic, if you think it of any worth whatsoever, you do not understand Albus. If you want cooperation- want information on those blasted Hallows or the like- want any acknowledgment of *your* wishes and ends, as opposed to fully and only Albus's *own*- what you need is leverage. And this should do nicely."

He gave it to him then. Draco unfolded it and read. He had seen it before. But not in this life.

Gellert –

Your point about wizard dominance being FOR THE

MUGGLES' OWN GOOD – this, I think, is the crucial point.

Yes, we have been given power and, yes, that power gives us

the right to rule, but it also gives us responsibilities over the

ruled. We must stress this point, it will be the foundation stone

upon which we build. Where we are opposed, as we surely will

be, this must be the basis of all our counter-arguments. We

seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD. And from this it

follows that where we meet resistance, we must use only the

force that is necessary and no more. (This was your mistake

at Durmstrang! But I do not complain, because if you had not

been expelled, we would never have met.)

Albus

Draco's throat had gone dry. "What do you want me to do with this?"

"Damage, Mr. Black," Aberforth said, with a dark satisfaction. "As much damage as you can."

For the Greater Good

Chapter Notes

> Hey all! Thanks so much for thoughts and comments, they really make me happy! BTW, updates are probably going to be later in the day from now on- this book is a lot more difficult to write than the others, so it's taking me longer, both because it's less book-based and because there's a lot of different plots interwoven. Anyway, hope you enjoy! <3
>
> Playlist

Back to Hogwarts that Sunday, and it seemed every Slytherin left in its walls who did *not* want Draco dead was urgently in need of his presence. Being how that only constituted two Slytherins, though, it was not an unmanageable number.

First was Severus, shooting him a look at dinner. Draco could read him well enough to discern that roughly as, *Come to my chambers at once, inconvenient boy, although for heaven's sake have the sense not to be* seen *doing it.*

Severus immediately yanked him in, with a nervous look behind even an invisibility cloak-wearing Draco. He seemed to have been waiting, likely pacing, by the door. "Two things," he began tersely.

"It's good to see you as well, beloved godfather," Draco said happily. Even if his smile tightened, when he saw Severus's eyes flick to Draco's blue tie in slight bemusement, as if still having to wonder for a moment why it wasn't green.

"I have little time to waste on your driveling ingratiation," Severus said, stepping back as if to avert any hugging attempts. "You should have had your fill of playacting at Christmas. Now, there are two things you must know, and I cannot tell you either, except face-to-face and alone." There was a curtness to his tone that had Draco wary, although not as wary as his words did. "I know not how much your half-witted or moon-inclined guardians deign to keep you informed, but you must have heard, if only by eavesdropping, the intelligence I learned over Christmas."

Draco only had to think for a second. "Remus told me," Draco said, with a sinking heart, "That Voldemort found out about the Naufragiam. And that's why we're making plans for evacuations to a second school."

"I do not know *how* exactly he came to understand what your starry-eyed cousin inflicted upon him, but suffice it to say," Severus said through gritted teeth, "That he did speak the word Naufragiam, and does plan the invasion of Hogwarts-"

"When?" Draco blurted. It seemed that his role with the potion, changing the blue loop, might have inadvertently *sped things up.*

"As soon as possible," Severus intoned grimly, "Given the effects the potion continues to have. He has deteriorated physically, I will say, dramatically from even the putrid snake skeleton reborn in the graveyard. Mentally as well. And there is no consensus among his followers how long he may have left. Yes, no research has been able to establish any sort of *timetable*- and I assure you, I myself was pressured into a fair share of that work, with a different copy of your loathsome Hecate book thrust into my hands along with many others- don't make that face, vain boy, if I am to have another hysterical fit about how your *poor godfather* has been tortured-"

"I would tell you anything," Draco blurted, tears threatening to come despite the warning, if not of panic yet. Almost worse than embarrassing respiratory problems would have been, though, was the awareness that he might be *getting used* to Severus's torture. "Anything I knew, anything you need about what I did- anything it takes, even if it means *giving* Voldemort the information, if it means *you* don't get-"

"*Listen*," Severus hissed. Draco took his hand, ignoring his stony demeanor, and inspected his fingernails for the telltale signs of Cruciatus. Dark red as ever, they were. He had the ludicrous fancy of offering Severus some of his enchanted nail polish, again a Christmas gift from Luna, to hide at least some of the scars of war. "Listen," Severus repeated, voice and gaze seeming to soften despite himself, at the sign of the stricken dismay in Draco's eyes, a heaviness of devastation that even his cynicism could not dismiss as mere playacting. "I was not the only Death Eater to fail him in this. Listen..."

Draco didn't. Severus's impatient voice seemed to drain away from Draco's ears, as the awareness of all his senses drifted down solely to the letter in his pocket.

"I seek not pity," Severus finished bitterly. "Only that you understand the necessity of Xaphan has doubled. Voldemort's fancy might strike him at *any* time, that it is simply now or never to make his assault. An improved contribution from my burdensome godson would-"

"How?" Draco demanded rudely. "How do you mean, make an assault? *How will he penetrate the defenses of Hogwarts*?" He forced himself not to immediately ask *Theo.* "A student who's turned to his side? Some form of subterfuge? Or just some secret passage he learns of- if he hears of Aberforth now that he's working with us, and *his* passage- oh, he'd like that the best, wouldn't he, coming in and killing Dumbledore by way of his own brother-" *To requite the loss of the sister. Perhaps, even in his own inevitable death, a part of Aberforth would be pleased by that.*

"The protection of Aberforth Dumbledore," Severus said smoothly, "Is of course of great concern. But rest assured, he will remain vigilant, and the Order will patrol Hogsmeade regularly incognito. Not to mention certain... safeguards that he himself insisted be placed on the passage and the Hog's Head, should he be overrun and the worst seems inevitable."

The grand reward of Draco's interference in poor Aberforth's case was increased prominence and his own personal self-destruct button. This was getting better and better. Trust the war to be going more smoothly when Draco was actively trying to sabotage Hogwarts, than now when he meant to help it.

"As for Voldemort, if worst comes to worst," Severus said coldly, "He will engage in a full-frontal assault, and try to take down Hogwarts's defenses with raw power. If not some dark rituals of his own. But I believe that the worst-case scenario for his side. And, for your information, there is still not a single Hogwarts students involved with the Death Eaters. In any event, the worst is over for myself, boy, so cease your fretting-"

"The worst has only begun for you, hasn't it," Draco said softly, remembering the words Harry had screamed in the blue loop, in front of the whole hall, before he took Voldemort down. The words that had exonerated Severus. Screaming that Dumbledore had *ordered* Severus to kill him.

"In one sense, yes." Severus rolled his eyes, taking the remark infinitely more drolly than intended. "Given the new importance of a place of sanctuary, as I was *trying* to tell you, a wizard of your raw power and talents in Transfiguration will be invaluable to work with Lockhart at Xaphan. You already have won his trust, and from his remarks on my last godforsaken visit, certainly his affection. I must check in on him each Sunday, as you check in on me, so if the ordeals could be combined, it would be indescribably merciful for my already overloaded-"

Draco seized on any crumb to raise his fatal spirits. "You want us to make godfather-godson extracurricular field trips to Xaphan? To see Gilderoy? To build *towers* together?"

"Only on Sundays," Severus cautioned, "Given you are at least *technically* still a student-mmph! Unhand me, you contemptible louse!"

Severus did not exactly suffer Draco's hug with a smile, but his attempts to free himself from were half-hearted at best. It made Draco think he didn't really mind.

Either that, or he didn't have the strength or energy to repel the enthusiasm. When Draco clung to Severus's shoulders, telling himself he would not have been sent back in time if Severus was just meant to die again, he could feel the aftershock tremors of Cruciatus, still vibrating in random bursts down his back.

Draco would have taken the steps up from the dungeon and gone straight to Dumbledore's office, had he not made another appointment already. It was an appointment he'd had daily at Grimmauld, and intended to have daily at Hogwarts. And he had been forced to cancel it today for yet another appointment. A note had appeared from around the corner on his way to supper, sliding cleanly into his pocket without a sound. The talon wand had not burnt it fully, though there were enough scorch marks to make the words somewhat indistinct. Eventually, Draco had made them out.

Black, Malfoy, Grindelwald, whatever you won't curse people's tongues for calling you now, you'll be in the Forbidden Forest at midnight if you know what's good for you. And given your lack of self-preservation- if you know what's good for your soppy pet Gryffindors too. Just go in the front on the way past Hagrid's hut and follow the light. If you're late, I'll spare your useful friends, but the world will be definitively relieved of the burden of 1 (one) Weasley.

There was no signature, which Harry seemed to find menacing. He went ashen as he read the note. Meanwhile, as Draco pulled them aside into an empty classroom, it was all he could do to hold back his giggles. "Could this be your aunt?" Harry asked breathlessly. "Or Nott? Someone's trying to lure you into a trap again-"

Draco snatched it and beamed. "Oh, come off it. Even if I didn't recognize the handwriting, I can tell just from reading who wrote *that.* It's fine. This is good."

"Why do you look so happy?" Harry said suspiciously. Those gears of his, ever-limited when it came to Draco, seemed to shift between two primary modes, from Protect-My-Dragon to Possess-My-Dragon. "Don't tell me this is some *secret assignation*."

Draco gave him a kiss, but Harry pushed him back with more suspicion. "What, are you trying to distract me? That won't-"

"No," Draco drawled cheekily. "I'm just pleased you know the *word* assignation." He ran a hand over Harry's chest to forestall further grumbling, looking up at him through his pale eyelashes and watching the effect he had on that gorgeous face. He'd never get tired of that helpless sweetness, melting for him, as guileless as anything under the sun. "Which it isn't. Don't you know that..."

Draco tried to find words that wouldn't make him sound hopelessly debased. "Wherever I go, I've got this..." He pulled the HJP initials forward on his necklace. "And this..." He tugged the collar of his robes and shirt aside, to show the trail of bite-shaped bruises too low for him to have to spell away. "And this now too," he finished, letting his hand settle by his hip, "To remind me who I belong to."

That got him kissed to oblivion for some time against the nearest stone wall. But eventually, Harry let him go, with promises of, "Tomorrow, after the lesson with Dumbledore."

If Dumbledore hasn't dumped my body weighted with stones in the Great Lake by then.

Draco had to venture deeper into the Forbidden Forest than expected. Before he saw Millie between the towering trees, thick interlocking web of shadow cutting off the moon, he saw the glow of white magical lights in individual wide orbs, wedged between branches of those foreboding trees. They threw into sharp relief the three hoops up high between them, at the height of a real pitch. Millie's broad figure was cast into uncertain silhouette, in this floating,

glowing netherworld she had conjured herself, looking somehow very small against the old unyielding vastness of the trees.

There was no space to play Quidditch proper, but he supposed her construction somewhat fit her narrower purpose. A great number of Quaffles and Bludgers were charmed by some complex training spell to periodically hurtle themselves forward, from random-seeming angles. Sometimes it was just one, like in a match. Sometimes it was three or four, or the lot, and sometimes the Bludgers, only two of those, joined in targeting her instead. The balls repelled floated docilely to nearby branches beside the lights, avoiding them almost intelligently, to wait their turn.

It took some time for Draco to recognize the spells as taken from that training material Viktor sent him. Millie had spent her fair share of time with it too, translating and commenting on the plays. But he hadn't known she'd learned its Keeper training spells, ones they'd never implemented in practice. Maybe she'd been training alone as well, even back then. Or maybe she'd noted them down with some sense of a worst case scenario going forward, when she would once again be left to practice alone.

Millie saved most shots. *Most.* They came at difficult angles, yes, and with a wave of her wand, perhaps faster than the real Quaffle would come after her, more in number and the like- but it was still *most*, and at the harder levels she set herself, not even the majority. The number of Quaffles that slipped in high or low past her, or that her hands in the stiff January cold were too weak to slap or punch out, made Draco's heart sink.

He shouldn't have been hovering here, on the Firebolt he'd been prescient or paranoid enough to bring, watching her unseen for this long. She would hate for him to have been analyzing her, perceiving her weakness. She was *much* worse than this time last year, when she'd been the first name on the team sheet even before Draco's own, the unquestioned starting Keeper for the Kingsnakes. It was clear backsliding when it came to her skills, despite every appearance of dedication, and a set-up that suggested many night hours. With the likeness in their pride, Millie would probably hate pity more than even mockery for it.

Draco flew back slowly, then made a show of swooping in on his Firebolt, neatly evading the charmed Bludgers as he made his grand entrance. Millie cursed and punched away a Quaffle with little care for whether it rebounded back at Draco. He ducked in time, and she waved her wand and made the balls fly slowly back to their places. "You're early!" she barked irritably.

Draco shrugged elegantly. "Do you mean for us to conduct this conversation in the air? It seems a less clandestine manner than you've clearly intended."

"No difficulty guessing it was me, then," Millie said, still irascible, as she followed down to the forest floor. The wind was, improbably, colder down there, or maybe they felt it worse without motion and exertion. Draco was dressed in thick coats and furs, but he still cast several strong Focillo charms on himself, before raising his wand to offer the same for her.

"Already have, no need," Millie said, stepping back with her wand coming to her hand.

"Inmotus. Tumultum adux." Draco pocketed the talon wand, fighting the urge to laugh in dismay. "Are you actually *afraid* of me?" Millie scowled, refusing to answer, and that was

worse than a denial or an agreement. "Well, Mills, I thought the forest was just more paranoia on your part over discovery, but instead it seems this has become your proverbial gymnasium. Taking it a bit overboard, isn't it, to risk this place so often to keep your secrets?"

"I'm not frightened of *here*." Millie rolled her eyes with little patience for him. "Nor of any creature in it." Her eyes lingered on Draco then, perhaps trying to suggest him to be amongst those creatures, though their flat wariness tended to imply the opposite.

"I *have* met some interesting creatures here, though. There's these house-sized spiders, some of them talk- real convention of them, their leader's called Aragog and they're all his children, you'd do best to steer clear of-"

"I know what Acromantula are," she said contemptuously, "And I know they would inhabit part of the forest far deeper than this. Now will you hear my message or not? You're wasting my practice time!"

"Millie, you have to know how untenable this is, right? This time of night, this place, all by yourself, it just won't be *enough* to keep from losing skills- it likely hasn't been already-" She looked halfway to cursing him before he finished that sentence. "My Keeper deserves more than this."

"I'm not your Keeper anymore," Millie grit out. "I want to warn you about *Theo*, and after that you can kindly fuck off, *Black*."

From her, the name almost stung more than Malfoy. He found himself bizarrely longing to be called, as she always had in Quidditch, *Grindelwald*, like Theo still did. "Okay. Please. I'm sorry."

"Two things," Millie said, in such an unerring impression of Severus, he almost wondered. But of course, he hadn't been the only one to pick up some things from their Head of House over the years- *no, Draco, just* her *Head of House now.* "One, I think something's happened over winter break. I don't know. Something's changed. He doesn't tell people any details, not even Blaise, but there's something different about him. He didn't talk at all at any meals, except- I heard him say to Pansy, 'I'm quiet because I'm happy.'"

Something cold slimed its way down Draco's spine. He told himself it was January wind, but he still wrapped his arms tightly around himself, against its bone-chill. "Why would Theo be happy?" he asked, more softly than he meant to. He felt his teeth chatter, like his warming charms had been mere empty noise. "You think something that would make *him* happy would be no good for me, is that it?"

"He's just- Pansy is the one he *has* been talking to, actually. The moment we got back, he went straight for her, pulled her aside, and they've been spending lots of time whispering together since."

"Why Pansy?" Draco was baffled. "She's not any closer to me than the rest of you lot. They were on the Kingsnakes together... but so were you, Astoria, Vince, Greg- Blaise was practically assistant manager too- what could he possibly want with her-"

"And she won't tell me what they talk about," Millie cut in ominously. "And normally she tells me *everything.*"

Draco smirked. "Maybe she's cheating on Blaise with him."

Millie looked liable to slap him. "This is just a joke to you, isn't it? Whether you live or die? Do *I* care more about it than you do?"

"It is a gift, Mills," Draco drawled, trying to lighten the mode, "To hear how much you care."

"And it's a fucking nightmare," Millie hissed, "To try so hard to help you, and see how much you *don't* care. But I guess you think you'll muddle through, right? Like you always do. You're powerful enough, you don't think you have to *worry* about things like the rest of us do. You're like- Salazar, you're like some student taking a class for the second time, who already knows the material, so you can just put in the bare minimum and still get the best grade at the end of term."

The accuracy of her metaphor, literally not a metaphor but a descriptor, made the cold pervade deeper, beneath furs that seemed to have been wildly overpriced. "I care about some things. I cared about the Kingsnakes. I *did*," he insisted at her skeptical expression. "I *still* care. Millie, you *cannot* keep training like this." He was seized with half a gem of inspiration. "Come to the Quidditch pitch at midnight on Saturday. I have it rented out for me late night all weekends."

The reminder of his privilege was hardly calculated to endear him to Millie. "Do you seriously expect me to foff about with you and your pet Weasel-"

"Got something against Weasleys?"

"As it happens, they're my least favorite of all your motley lot," she spat. It made sense, in one way, given that so many of them had been her Quidditch rivals. Even Harry had just been one person. "Do you know how it *feels*, practicing by myself in the dark, when a Keeper not fit to tie my boots gets to play all the matches he likes in the sunlight? And *all* of them are odious. It's like they were specifically designed to be as irritating as possible- their garish hair, their insipid attempts at humor- their *freckles*-" Millie shuddered like she needed an exorcism at the mere thought.

"Okay, okay, I get the idea," Draco laughed, holding up his hands, "But Ron and I only actually use the pitch on Fridays. Saturday, Sunday, that's free, and you could if you want. Don't worry about the connection to me- come in secret, cast concealing and Caterwauling charms to be sure no one will sneak up and see, and I'll only even be there the first night. Just trust me. If you want to be a professional Keeper someday, you *have* to do this."

"Who will I be practicing with," Millie said warily, "If not with you?"

"Won't that make your week fun," Draco called, "The *suspense* of it all!" and enjoyed her rather uncouth hand gesture as he sauntered off, back towards the warmth of Hogwarts.

Harry wanted to see Draco on Monday night, of course, right after his lesson, but Draco told him he had a meeting that might go long, refusing to specify. Harry insisted he'd wait for Draco in the Room of Requirement as long as necessary. Draco was selfish enough to let him, despite the non-zero chance he would step into the office that night and never leave it. But then again, when it came to Harry, he had always been selfish.

He waited for Harry to round the corner and disappear, then used the password and entered. Dumbledore looked ever the same, and even less surprised to see him there than last time. "Mr. Black," Dumbledore said, with every appearance of warmth. "Please, have a seat."

Draco sat, and refused the lemon drops this time. "No, thank you. As it happens, I'm the one who has something for you." He pushed all the candy and frippery aside, and took the letter in its plain green envelope out. He slid it casually across the table. "I've recently come into possession of some unusual correspondence," he said, widening his eyes in an earnestness he meant to be provoking rather than convincing. "I thought it only right, as a student, to turn it in at once to my headmaster."

Dumbledore looked curious, but only for the moment it took to open the letter. Lowering his spectacles, he made the mistake of beginning to read it aloud, in some indulgent, grandfatherly pretense of matching Draco's parody of civility. "Gellert- your point about wizarding dominance being for-"

The words died in Dumbledore's throat. As he read the rest of his own missive in silence, the blood and expression both drained from his florid affable face, until he seemed some ancient figure that a horrible sight had turned to stone upon the seeing. He froze completely. Draco had not anticipated just how shaken this would leave Dumbledore, a man he had never seen so much as ruffled by *him*, even his murder attempts. But he couldn't deny the petty part of him, after their last conversation, that enjoyed the sight.

"Where did you get- no, it is of little matter," Dumbledore began, hands limply letting the letter slip down to his desk. "Impressive, Mr. Black," he said, with an attempt at genial, superior omnipotence. His own face did not even seem to believe it had succeeded. "Impressive indeed."

Draco had thought Dumbledore might incinerate or Vanish the letter. "I have copies, of course."

"Please, Mr. Black, do enlighten me," Dumbledore inquired, pushing up his spectacles with a fretful jerk of his hand, "Why you have you made copies?"

Draco shrugged languidly, giddy at how off-balance he had the smug bastard now. "Why else do you make copies of a text? Either safekeeping or distribution."

"Distribution," Dumbledore echoed, and there was something almost like pain on his face- not betrayal or malice, though, nor even perhaps caused by Draco. His piercing blue eyes looked very much like Aberforth's had while speaking of the past, when his gaze left Draco in compulsive-looking fits to stare back at the letter. "To whom, may I ask?"

Draco snorted, telling himself not to play the villain too openly. He shouldn't gloat or overplay his hand. "The Order, to start. And I do call the editor of the Quibbler my uncle. Not to mention Miss Rita Skeeter of the Daily Prophet will eternally owe me a favor. Perhaps the German Ministry of Magic, or their papers as well, or any other interested countries... a document of such international interest should, naturally, receive the widest distribution possible."

"Have you thought through, Mr. Black," Dumbledore said, leaning forward across the desk with an intensity uncomfortable from him, "The likely consequences of that decision?"

Draco chuckled, stretching insouciantly in his chair. "Yeah. For starters, it would ruin *you.*" Dumbledore's silence urged him on. "There'd be a public outcry, even so many years down the road. Outraged parents and all. But I don't think Scrimgeour would need too much public pressure, to use this as an excuse to remove you from your post at Hogwarts."

"And whom," Dumbledore said quietly, "Do you believe he would send to replace me? A returning Dolores Umbridge, perhaps?"

Draco shrugged to convey his disinterest. "I was thinking more of the consequences for the *Order*. They might splinter, and they might not, but they would never be so united, nor so trusting of you, ever again. It would cripple it, practically and psychologically. A huge boost for Voldemort, conversely. Talk about a recruiting tool. I think he's staying at my old house. My mum could pass it on to him. I mean, I did rather torture her a bit, just the once, but I think that the hand I *didn't* set repeatedly on fire still should work."

"You have no intention, though, of ever publicizing this letter, do you? Blackmail, Mr. Black? Is that not somewhat beneath your standards?"

It had worked on Remus in third year, and Umbridge in fifth. "On the contrary, Albus." Dumbledore's eyes flared, with a real anger that made the room feel smaller and the air there tighter. Fawkes seemed to sit up in her perch. Draco ignored the spike of fear that rolled through his gut. "On the *contrary*. I thought you would appreciate the new *kinship* I've discovered between us."

Draco reached forward and helpfully pointed out the relevant lines, with a delicate hand that he got the feeling Dumbledore would like to sever from its wrist sooner than let near to him. "'I do not complain, because if you had not been expelled, we would never have met.' Isn't that romantic! It recalls the nature of my own sentiments, towards our mutual friend Harry. To think, Albus, some people believe you delayed so long in confronting your Gellert because they thought you a coward!"

A different man might have protested of the assistance Dumbledore had rendered Harry and Draco over the years, saving Harry's life more than once, or the legal battles, to the point of acting as the litigator for Sirius when he was found innocent and free. Dumbledore didn't bother with that, cutting coolly to the heart. "Enough, Mr. Black. You are surely aware of the canonical structure of a blackmail message. It begins with the declaration of possession of secret knowledge damaging to the blackmailed, which you have accomplished admirably, to be sure. But it is typical to conclude with some summation of demand or demands, that the blackmailer seeks satisfied in order to keep this knowledge secret." Dumbledore waited, then

asked more bluntly, "What do you demand for your silence? That your godfather cease his work spying, I would assume?"

Draco had spent a great deal of time thinking of this, without consultation with anyone else, even Aberforth. The words sprung to his tongue with ease. "Oh, of course. That's just for starters. But what I *want*? The price for my silence?" Draco planted both hands on the desk, and was the one to lean forward then. He remembered his face seen in the Pensieve, when he cast Sectumsempra on Mr. Nott, and hoped it had something of that viciousness on it now, as he slapped the desk.

"I want the Resurrection Stone."

That startled Dumbledore, of all things, into laughter. "You want," Dumbledore repeated, scarcely seeming to believe his ears, "The Resurrection Stone. The one famed, I presume, as part of the Deathly Hallows."

"Yes," Draco said flatly, smirking nastily but not joining the laughter. "Give me the Resurrection Stone, and I'll give you every copy of the letter I have, and won't say a word of this to anyone ever. That is the deal. That is the *only* deal, Albus, and I will only offer it once."

"I do not have the Resurrection Stone," Albus exclaimed, the very picture of amused innocence. "I truly know nothing of the Deathly Hallows." It was harder to seem a good actor, when the listener knew how very much you were just acting.

"The symbol of the man you loved." Draco enjoyed the way that made Albus flinch, mask newly resumed and yet already threatening to fall away. "The Deathly Hallows. Grindelwald's obsession. His *calling card*. You knew *nothing* of that."

"Only that they were a fairytale that he, like you, clung to for some illusory comfort-"

"You won the Elder Wand from him, in a duel when you defeated him. Made it easier to imprison him in Nurmengard so long, taking *that* away from him. That's what you wield now. The cloak, I don't know about that. But I don't believe you don't know exactly where it is. And where the Stone is. And I think you have the Resurrection Stone, too."

"Gellert," Dumbledore said mildly, leaving aside any pretense with that one innocuous first name, "Was obsessed with the Resurrection Stone, because he believed it could make an Inferi army for him. Is that your interest, Mr. Black?"

Draco hadn't wanted to laugh, but that forced it out of him, deep from his stomach, derisive and mocking. If it sounded a bit like Aunt Bella, well, he had spent an excess of time with her in his formative years. "Are you serious? That's pathetic. You don't need the Resurrection Stone to make Inferi. And even if you did, what a waste of time. I'm surprised Grindelwald would waste his time with that. He should have been too powerful, even at that age, to ever need them." Draco tilted his head, and made himself the very picture of Grindelwald reborn, as he drawled, "I know *I* am."

"Then why do you want it?"

"I'm the one who should be asking questions here, aren't I? Why did you want *him*? Grindelwald," Draco added helpfully, when Dumbledore did not answer. "Oh, come on, you must have some explanation for this..." Draco wrinkled his nose as he gestured at the letter. "This servile Goebbels-to-Hitler tripe. What, were you blinded with infatuation? With true love? Confused? Acting knowingly against your own beliefs? Or did you just believe this too? Is this who you used to be? Is it who you are *still*?"

"'Goebbels to Hitler'," Dumbledore echoed. "I see the O you received on your Muggle Studies OWL was not unearned."

"What, it fits," Draco said with a shrug. "You certainly did help with his branding. And I have a keen interest in branding. In multiple senses, as it happens, but this *is* the sort of branding that gets *For the Greater Good* carved over the entrance to Nurmengard. I mean, it's no *Arbeit Mach Frei*, but it has a certain pithy treacliness that amuses the aesthete- in juxtaposition to what lies behind it."

"I was not," Dumbledore began, with a real stungness before he suppressed it. "I never suggested- never imagined- it matters not. This deal you suggest, Mr. Black. Let us turn to that."

"Told you already." Draco held out his hand. "Well? The Resurrection Stone. I'm waiting." At Dumbledore's thunderous face, he snickered. "Come on, I'm far too important to far too many key pieces for you to want to even *hurt*, let alone kill. Not that it would be any use, since if I no longer control the copies, your disgrace becomes certain nonetheless. Come on, Resurrection Stone." Draco snapped his fingers. "Chop chop."

There was a war on Dumbledore's face, with far more tormented *life* there than Draco would have ever thought he'd see. More than anyone likely had seen for so many years, even McGonagall or Severus. There was weakness there, a real man, caught in the crucible of his worst memories like Draco was a Patronus-proof Dementor, fonder of stones than souls.

Until finally, Dumbledore's face hardened, mask back in place as if it had always been the only real thing, and Draco had only imagined a human being in the room with him. "Do as you must, Mr. Black. I will not stop you. But I cannot give you what I do not have."

"You think I won't," Draco said fiercely, "Because I don't want to damage the Order? Please. I can still go straight to Harry with this. He's *waiting* for me. Right now, he's waiting-"

"Unsurprisingly," Dumbledore commented. "Go ahead, Mr. Black. Do as you must." He smiled congenially, and gestured towards the door of his office.

"You'll regret this," Draco growled. "Sooner or later, you will look back at this, and you will regret that answer. I will *make* you regret it. That is a promise."

Still, Dumbledore didn't try to stop Draco from snatching up the letter, to take with him on his stomping way out.

Harry was there in the Room of Requirement, sprawled out across the blue silk sheets looking pensive. His thoughts, for once, did not seem to be full of Draco. Instead, they were ones he babbled out right away, before Draco had the chance to deliver any life-shattering revelations. Apparently- before Draco had seen Dumbledore, so he couldn't ascribe it to that- Dumbledore had given Harry a mission.

"It's Slughorn," Harry said excitedly. "He's the key to the mystery of Tom Riddle. Of how to defeat Voldemort. That's why Dumbledore brought him back. Why he moved your godfather to Defense. Slughorn taught Tom Riddle, just like Dumbledore, and he liked Riddle- he knows something, but he won't tell, and he always keeps Veritaserum on him. So I have to find some other way. It has to be me..."

Draco tuned Harry out without meaning to, flopping down beside him and staring at the dark ceiling. His body felt unclean with the intrusion of the past, of his own secret knowledge that could not be shared no matter how he tried. This felt like the position he'd just placed Dumbledore in, with two options and neither any good- not any good at all, because Dumbledore knew, perhaps nearly as well as Draco, everything that had to happen, in order to take Voldemort down.

Draco could break Harry's faith in Dumbledore tonight. He could do it here and now, without even much or *any* manipulation or touching to influence him. The letter itself, with sufficient explanation and context, would do the work for him. If not, there was Aberforth's story about Ariana. No one would hate that story as much as Harry. If Harry needed to hear it from Aberforth's own lips- well, the passage from the Room of Requirement to the Hog's Head was just a sentence away.

Harry would realize that everything he knew about Dumbledore, this virtuous public face he showed the world, had been built on the foundation of a lie. That the man who had fought the century's two Dark Lords, when no one else could, had also been part of their creation, not one but both. That Dumbledore was a Dark Lord himself, or as good as one, not just in power but in ruthlessness. Except something had gone wrong in that usual selfish script of power, and all that power had turned towards the maintenance of the status quo, the maintenance of his own appearance of blamelessness even while his hands were so covered in blood, Verniculpa might have no *effect* on them...

But if Draco took Dumbledore down, what would that do to the blue loop? He had been lacerating himself for changes that worsened things- what would it do, to sever Harry Potter from Dumbledore's plans and guidance, from the *blue* path he had taken to Voldemort's defeat? Leaving aside what it would do to Harry personally, finding out one of his very first father figures was tainted, and robbing him of an attachment so strong, it seemed to help define what it meant to him to *be* the Boy Who Lived. No, with this information, Harry sure wouldn't be laboring to get information from Slughorn on Dumbledore's behalf. Not to mention all the madness he'd done during the height of Voldemort's short reign: running about in the woods getting captured, sneaking into the Ministry for Merlin knew what, returning to Hogwarts and leading its retaking, robbing Gringotts on dragonback- well, Draco had taken care of that part somewhat, actually- how much of it would happen, if Harry did not have that light in the sky to follow, however false the star?

"Draco," Harry finished, "What do you think? Do you have any idea about how to get it out of Slughorn?" At Draco's furtive face, Harry laughed and misinterpreted. "I know your first response, dragon, and no, there won't be any torturing done on my part..."

"I don't know." Draco edged closer to Harry, trying for a kiss. "I'm not going to be useful with this. Let me be useful another way, hmm..."

Harry laughed but fell into Draco's kiss easily enough. It was almost enough to make Draco forget, then, getting what it seemed he needed from Harry almost every day now. Or at least enough so that, even as his clothes ended up on the floor, the letter to Gellert stayed in their pockets.

Not that Draco was about to leave it at that. He did give the letter to Harry, sealed, as they were leaving the room. But he told him it was cursed, when opened, to blind any eyes except those of its intended recipient. So he had better make the delivery without snooping.

"It's okay," Harry said, catching him to turn him towards a last kiss at the threshold. "I won't snoop. I don't. I haven't even been... mmm... watching your name on the map at night anymore." A small paranoid part of Draco, remembering Millie's vague and impracticable warning about Theo, almost feared that, but he nodded encouragingly anyway. "And I..." Harry bit his lip, playing with Draco's tie. "I'm starting to get the feeling you might like me best anyway."

Hermione looked so relieved the next morning to see him waiting, at the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, that it was clear Harry had done his job. "Draco!" she exclaimed, virtually trampling some second-years in her haste as she rushed towards him.

"Has Ginny left already?" Draco asked her, trying to peer past the Fat Lady into the common room as red-clad simpletons streamed out en masse. "I need to speak with her."

"What?" Hermione gasped, looking dumbfounded and then murderous. "Ginny? After what you gave me last night, you- you're here to see *Ginny*?"

"Ginny!" Draco exclaimed, and neatly extracted her from holding hands with Dean, to lead her into another empty hallway. Hermione fuming above them was quickly forgotten. "Just the person I wanted to see! I like it when you wear your hair that way, you know. You're looking lovely as ever this morning." It was only after the words came out that Draco realized he sounded like Gilderoy. Ah, well. It was better than nothing.

"What?" Ginny was blinking blearily with sleep. "I haven't, er, even had time to brush my hair..." It was, in truth, quite tangled, but Draco had just assumed that Dean had gotten frisky before his porridge. She was still very pretty today. As always, a fact that had used to fill him with irrational loathing.

"Draco? Is that you?" She tilted her head as if expecting someone else using Polyjuice. "You never want to talk to me."

"That's not true," Draco lied feebly, and produced a thermos of hot dark coffee for her. Courtesy of Dobby, who knew exactly how Ginny liked her coffee. Draco hadn't even been sure whether Ginny *drank* coffee. "And I- I won't try and hide it, Ginny- I need a favor from you."

"Oh," Ginny sighed, long and knowing. She rubbed her eyes before taking a long gulp of coffee. "Of course, it's only because you need something. Is Luna about? Normally she *translates* your whole shtick to me-"

"You don't need a Draco translator!" Draco exclaimed, though he saw humor in her sleepy green eyes. "And it's not a bad favor. I think you'd enjoy it. You have thought about playing professional Quidditch, haven't you? Well, it would be a favor for you as well. It'd involve the material Viktor Krum sent me last year. And he's sent me more since. *Translated*." Ginny held out her hand bluntly, and Draco scowled. "Not as a trade! To use *practicing*."

"Wouldn't you rather practice with another Seeker, though?" Ginny said skeptically. "And, like, anyone but me?"

"What do you mean, anyone but you, Miss Ginevra?" Draco whined. "After everything we've been through together..."

"You mean the Quidditch World Cup? Dumbledore's Army? Fighting at the Ministry together? Yeah, you would *think* we would have bonded," Ginny said, very much like Ron in her manner of cutting right to the truth. "I thought maybe you might dislike me a *little* less after all that. That I would have, I don't know, finally *proved* myself to you, or something? But you've made it clear this year too, how much you hate having me around-"

"Okay, fine, we haven't always been the closest in our little group-"

"You've never seemed to think of me as *part* of your 'little group'-"

Once again, old sins of rudeness were coming home to roost. "Well, things have changed recently. Have you heard about my Weasley ranking?"

Ginny nodded caustically. "I know I'm second to last. Only better than Percy."

"See, it's that exactly," Draco said, seizing on an excuse that was at least half-true. These days, half-truths were the most honest he could get. He couldn't exactly go blabbing that he'd been insecure because she dated Harry in another timeline. Nor that some of that jealousy had come to feel curiously muted, ever since Harry had started regularly *railing* him. "It's Percy. I hate Percy. Do you remember the Yule Ball? How he screamed to everyone that I'm a Death Eater?" Ginny's gaze darkened with annoyance. Bond by a common enemy. Even if I can't add any more names than the nine already there to the bloody list. "I hate him more than I can say. And when he showed up at Christmas, and said those things to Harry about his *parents*-"

"You like me now," Ginny said slowly, "Because I punched my brother in the nuts?"

Draco hadn't seen that part specifically. "You got him in the *nuts*?" he cackled.

"I don't know if it was a punch or just a knee there, it was all kind of a blur," she said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, you're definitely second in the ranking now. Just to Ron. That raises you all the way up." And Draco meant it, soon-to-die twin or not. "I have to admit you a superior human being of exquisite class and discernment, if you punched one Percival Weasley in the babymakers."

Ginny grinned despite her wariness. "That's it? That's all it takes?"

That, and years of you fighting on our side, and finally sealing the deal with Harry that same day. "Think of it this way. If you'd never been that fond of someone, but then they went and did what you did to Percy, how would you react?"

Ginny considered. "I might offer them my hand in marriage. Or at least send flowers. Bulbous, suggestively shaped flowers."

Draco laughed aloud, surprising himself. "Ginny," Draco said, "Our interests converge. Let's help each other. Saturday night, midnight, the Quidditch pitch, bring your Quidditch gear, and don't be late!"

He ran off before she could ask any more questions. He had to fortify himself, after all, to face Hermione, after leaving her on such a cliffhanger.

She finally tracked him down that afternoon, leading him from their library table whatever Harry's protestations, with a face like she would have dragged him by his hair if necessary. They ended up in the trophy room, locked and soundproofed, just as they had in third year after Draco told her he knew Sirius Black. She sat down with a huff, none of her growing maturity and prettiness doing a thing to make her look less like third-year Hermione, with those wide squirrel eyes, wilder with frantic curiosity. "Professor Dumbledore? And *Grindelwald*?"

"There's a lot I have to tell you." Draco was not looking forward to hearing about her reaction to his blackmail attempt. What, it had worked on two other Hogwarts professors, it had been worth a try, at least..."And I'll always tell you as much of the truth as I can, remember? I promised that a year ago, Striker, and I'm going to try to hold to it now."

It took some time to explain, how her theory about Dumbledore's tie to the Mirror of Erised with the Elder Wand had him thinking about other Hallows, and 'maybe' other mirrors. It took longer to lay out Dumbledore's sordid past, especially details about Ariana from Aberforth. Skeeter had done a better job at this. What seemed to trip Hermione up most was Aberforth's lack of knowledge as to just *who* had killed Ariana Dumbledore.

"I know you say he couldn't see anything to help in the Pensieve memory, no matter how much he looked. But he must have *some* instinct," she said skeptically. "After all that. If he's even telling the truth, and hasn't really known all along. Trouble is, even if he did, all three suspects make sense. If it was Professor Dumbledore, then that's why Aberforth- oh, God, I

can't believe this is even true- punched Professor Dumbledore at the funeral. If it was Aberforth, then it makes sense why he took to drinking and isolated himself, out of guilt. And if it was Grindelwald-" She frowned, that analytical bend bypassing the emotion in the story, which had seemed to choke her up at first. Draco felt a keen rush of affectionate pride. "That would actually make less sense. I mean, apart from that Grindelwald did flee the country, and avoid Dumbledore- but they avoided each other. And any of those reactions could be explained regardless, whoever did it. With or *without* knowledge of the real perpetrator..."

"If Dumbledore knew," Draco said slowly, "And I don't think we could ever manage to find out if he does- if he had seen, and *known* it was Grindelwald who killed his sister- when they dueled, and he defeated Grindelwald and had him at his mercy, wouldn't he have *killed* him for it?"

Hermione looked more rueful than disturbed. "Not everyone thinks like you, Frankenstein."

"Not to mention, the legend has claiming the Elder Wand be from killing its old owner. Killing him would have made absolutely *sure* it was his."

"Like I said," Hermione sighed, "Not everyone thinks like you. If we look at it from probability, based on their magical abilities and what they might have been casting, it's a dead wash too. Grindelwald and Professor Dumbledore were both very powerful, far more than Aberforth. That might mean their magic would be more likely to kill. But Aberforth also would have had less *control* over his magic, so even with less power, it might be the more likely of the three to go astray... Grindelwald was most likely to cast dark curses- but if he had been fixed still casting Cruciatus, then it's a question whether Cruciatus can ever kill, and that quickly and unperceived. It evens out. I can justify it *any* which way in my head. If Aberforth doesn't know, I can see why this would haunt him. Even for his whole life."

She looked to feel some of that frustration. "It is a real puzzle. And there's just no clear answer... Even if Aberforth did know, it would make the most sense for him to lie if it had been him, for his own sake. But he might for his brother as well, fallout or not- or even for *Grindelwald*, to have an excuse to keep hating his brother this much..."

"Hermione, you're going to drive yourself crazy," Draco interrupted, putting an arm around her shoulders to calm her. He made out some love bites from Ron and smiled to himself. How they'd grown up, and yet in some ways, how they hadn't. "What does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal," Hermione said tensely, "Since if Professor Dumbledore won't talk- you said Aberforth already searched and questioned that Bagshot woman- then I'm sorry, but the only other person we know who could *possibly* know him and Grindelwald's secrets, who's still alive- that's Aberforth. It matters how truthful he's been to you, and-"

"I'll question him as much as you want," Draco sighed, "Or you can, but he wasn't part of their research. He's talked about how it was. To him it just seemed fairytale nonsense. He wasn't *interested*. Hermione," he whined, and then brightened, "You're missing a more obvious solution. To so *many* questions. We'll just have to go to it and get in."

"To where?" Hermione said, her adorable squirrel face so full of trepidation, she looked to have some suspicion already, much as she was hoping otherwise.

"To Nurmengard."

"NO!"

"To talk to Grindelwald, obviously, he's sitting there, still alive, so idle and bored, it'd be such a waste not to avail ourselves of his readily available pool of knowledge-"

"'Readily available?'" Hermione shrieked so loudly, Draco feared his Inmotus would barely hold. "'READILY AVAILABLE'? Draco, just because you're *nicknamed* after something, it doesn't mean you should go and *find* it! If Dr. Frankenstein was real, I wouldn't be advising you to go find him and team up to create a superior Golem! I swear, if you even *try* and get Luna involved with something like that, as a 'Rat Thieves Project'..."

Draco didn't bother to try and seem remorseful. These were some of his happiest times, witnessing Hermione's simultaneous comical apoplexy and unwilling fascination, at the bomb dropped of such incredible secrets. "They do say you should never meet your heroes," he jibed, and Hermione put her head in her hands. Draco leaned forward and nuzzled affectionately at one side of her thick hair.

After a great deal of groaning, Hermione pulled back to look him in the eye. "Draco Lupin Black," she said firmly, "I don't *care* what you think you know. We are NOT going to break into the Prison of Nurmengard to question *GELLERT GRINDELWALD*, and that is *FINAL*!"

Draco considered. "I'm tasked with helping more with Xaphan. The rebuilding. It'll give me a lot of time there unearthing things. Time to investigate anything I find."

"You said there was the name Dantanian," Hermione said quietly, "Over the observatory. Draco, that's right. If you truly can't find anything at the *citadel*, that would be the time to despair, and entertain desperate insane plots, much as *you* love having those be as Plan *A*. But until that time, it makes more sense to exhaust the resource of the *ancient citadel* and library that you're the *heir* of, first!"

"We might not have much time, though," Draco sighed, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. "Severus says the Dark Lord knows about the Naufragiam, but not when it will finish him off. He says Voldemort could decide to attack Hogwarts at any moment."

"Well," Hermione said crisply. "There's never a better time than imminent mortal peril for research."

Valentine's Gifts

Chapter Notes

Playlist

It was perhaps fortuitous that Millie arrived, got on her broom, and got in the air with Draco first. If not, the sight of red hair in the night beside Draco's moon-lightened halo would have likely sent her stalking right back the way she came.

As it was, Ginny's arrival only had Millie looking down and squinting dubiously. "I didn't just spot red robes, did I?" she asked warily. "And is that red *hair*?" But the hook of being on the air on the actual Hogwarts Quidditch pitch again, for the first time since she had called herself one of the Kingsnakes, proved enough to keep her hovering beside him.

"It *is* a Weasley!" she exclaimed, once Ginny had come out from the broomshed and taken to the air. Once Ginny had floated close enough to make out how long her hair was, her voice went twice as affronted. "Is it the *girl* Weasley?"

"Millicent Bulstrode?" Ginny gasped, zooming up in disbelief, her red hair a flaming trail behind her in the waning moonlight. "You've got to be kidding me! She told the world you would *betray Harry*! In that stupid article!" Draco would have tried to be moved by this show of loyalty, now that he and Ginny were technically friends. If it wasn't coming at the most inconvenient time.

"Girl Weasley," Millie acknowledged snippily.

"Come on," Ginny snapped, voice quickly more venomous than Draco had nearly ever heard it. "You know my name."

Draco looked up to see Millie sneering, in a manner usually reserved for Zacharias Smith. Or, well, him, this year. "No. I really *don't*."

"You *know* my name is Ginny!" Ginny yelled. "*Ginny* Weasley! Draco, what is she doing here? Is this a joke?"

Draco looked between the girls, one so familiar and adorable, one still provoking remnants of wary sullenness in him, though any uneducated observer would probably ascribe the opposite labels to the two. Aside from the striking visual contrast, with Ginny's Chaser's build making her look eminently crushable by Millie's formidable silhouette, there was his ostensible loyalties. "No. I didn't think I'd have to explain this to the two of you. It makes perfect sense. Listen and then you can do your posturing. Why are the two of you at loggerheads right away anyway?"

"She's a Weasley, isn't that enough?" Millie scoffed.

At the same time, Ginny answered more helpfully, "There were some... incidents between us, in the Gryffindor-Slytherin match last year."

"That's the past," Draco said dismissively, though he could only imagine the kind of afters that would have ensued between Millie and the most skilled of the Gryffindor Chasers, especially after Ginny put some in past her. He knew how well Millie could hold a grudge. And Ginny seemed as stubborn as any of her brothers, too. "There wasn't anything between you at Gryffindor-Slytherin this year, right?"

"Obviously not," Ginny said, with an eye-roll audible in her voice. "Because she wasn't *there*, but if she had been, I'm sure she would have still-"

"She couldn't be there," Draco interrupted curtly, "Because she wasn't allowed to be. No girls on Slytherin anymore-"

"And whose fault is that?" Millie growled, turning towards Draco. Her hostility seemed free-flowing, willing to attach itself to whatever target seemed the most available at the time. Too much pent-up energy, it seemed, or at least he willed it to be that simple. Let her turn it to Quaffles again.

"I know," Draco called, equably but quite loudly, "Which is why I've found you a training partner. A top-rate Chaser..." Ginny looked gratified at this, though not enough to erase the horrified look she'd gotten at the words *training partner.* "Who did give you trouble in the past, even near the *peak* of your form, so you know it'll be useful to go against her- much more than an out-of-practice Seeker like me-"

"I could just ask Astoria or Pansy," Millie protested. "If I was that desperate to train with a Chaser-"

"No," Draco said, gentle but firm, "You couldn't. We both know you couldn't. And we know why."

Ginny looked between them dubiously, lamentably quick on the update. "What is going on here, anyway? Why are you trying to help her, after they all dropped you and she talked shit about you in the Prophet? Are you two secretly still friends or something?"

Millie gave Draco a look like he had gotten her killed that very moment. "Which you'll kindly keep to yourself, Ginny," Draco said smoothly, "If you truly want to *prove* yourself to me, as you said you would-"

"I thought I *had*, at the Ministry-"

"You fought at the *Ministry*? What, did you help murder Theo's-"

Talk about conversations Draco didn't want to hear. "Quiet!" Draco yelled. "Don't talk over me, or I'll take *away* that option!"

Ginny flinched, flying back from him, but Millie held her ground, unimpressed. "Please, Grindelwald. *Langlock*? Didn't that threat get tired in, like, third year?"

"*Anyway*," Draco said, as Ginny shot Millie a reluctantly impressed look. Millie didn't seem to notice. "Saturday and Sunday nights. Extra training. Chaser and Keeper. Plenty of drills in the material from Krum I gave you translated, Mills-"

"Why does *she* get to hold the training material-"

"Because I planned and ran *plays* for the Kingsnakes last year, rather than swanning about posing doing whatever your lot calls *tactics*-"

"Oh, like that's supposed to *impress* me? You only won the cup by a little over us-"

"Just because Draco has this mental block against Potter where he's too dickmatized to function! If it weren't for that bogus Snitch catch-"

"Dickmatized?" Draco echoed, trying not to be amused. "Listen, listen! Yes, Millie has the material, Ginny, because she *is* familiar with Viktor's papers. And she speaks German, for everything I didn't get to translating. But Mills, you'll let Ginny look as much as you want, right? Anyway, this will be good for both of you. You want to play professional Quidditch when you leave Hogwarts, don't you?"

"Oh, so you're just telling her *all* my secrets," Millie said, unimpressed, while Ginny gave Millie an evaluating look.

"Draco, she has *one* season of experience on an actual team, and if she can't play for the rest of the time at Hogwarts-"

"Oh, there likely won't be a Hogwarts to play at next year for you either, Ginny," Draco said cheerfully, and brushed past both girl's stricken, paralyzed stares and silence. "So. Let's see some training! It's time to go for your dreams together!"

"I think," Millie said shakily, "Even Girl Weasley couldn't blame me for cursing you out of the sky for that last part."

"Agreed," Ginny muttered.

Draco took that small bit of agreement as his cue to leave them to it. He thought with any luck, at least *some* Quidditch would ensue eventually without him, even if it took all night.

He'd been too pessimistic. Whatever their differences, he still looked back and saw them playing before he had gotten back inside the castle.

Draco had thought the next day helping at Citadelle Xaphan would be peaceful in comparison. He should have known better. He'd barely finished getting up from the Portkey to Xaphan and brushing off the dust of centuries before another set of his associates were at each other's throats.

He didn't know why he'd expected it to go smoothly, working with both Severus and Gilderoy on the rebuilding. Maybe, blamefully enough, he'd expected for Lockhart- whether from secret affections, or years beaten into submission at L'Infern- to defer to Severus no matter what. That likely would have been true in some, well, *choice* circumstances. But when it came to castle reconstruction, Gilderoy had genuine expertise, and was no less ready to claim his prerogative over it than he had been his more illusory DADA credibility.

When Severus tried to send Draco off right away, to clear out dust from the remnants of the castle's great hall, Gilderoy protested, claiming there was no point to putting a wizard of Draco's talents to brute busywork. "Can the *gargoyles* clear dust?" Severus snarled.

Gilderoy looked impatient, a more understandable affectation when their arrival had seen his hands already covered in dirt and grime from labor. Save his Ravenclaw-blue furs, which Draco had gotten charmed impervious. It was quite a strange contrast, his lavish garb and his filthy hands. If not as strange as with the Potions master currently eviscerating him with his glowering dark eyes.

"No, that's too delicate a task for them. Even the Severus gargoyle," Gilderoy added innocently, as if he didn't anticipate the look of utter loathing that reminder earned from Severus. He ignored it as if had never been. "But the others who come by to help sometimes can. Sirius and Remus, or Frank and Alice-"

"You seem to take for granted the energies of far more *useful* witches and wizards-"

Draco was just surprised to hear Severus now included Sirius on the list of the useful. Maybe that apology had done something after all. Or maybe it was just worth brushing past even that grudge, to make a point against his most-loathed Lockhart.

"Severus," Gilderoy interrupted serenely, "What I require is for Draco to assist me in a complex reconstitutive transfiguration-"

"You might stick to words *below* three syllables," Severus said icily, "If you intend to maintain any pretense you know what you're talking about-"

Gilderoy slipped off mid-insult and returned from the library tower with an open tome in hand. "Here," he said, handing *Construction and Deconstruction* to Draco. It was easy to read, with the morning sun high above them, on a day full of wind and chill but a very clear sky. It was almost ludicrously blue, that sky. It must be reflecting a beautiful color onto the ocean. Draco would be tempted to ask Gilderoy the path down to the water, if he hadn't had a job to do. And if his presence as mediator didn't seem necessary to keep Severus from starting to leak smoke out of his ears in frustration. He could practically hear Severus's thoughts in his head. *I thought myself rid of this blowhard years ago. And now I have to listen to* him *tell* me *the best use of my* godson?

"Tempus Itinerantur," Draco read, and nearly dropped the book. Severus's head whipped around as well, although not quickly enough that Draco need fear any overly accurate suspicions on his part. He looked rather appalled between the disjunction between the spell's stated purpose and its name.

"Ah, yes, quite the intriguing piece of magic," Gilderoy said airily. "There was a copy of this book at Castell de L'Infern, see-" Gilderoy turned the book in Draco's hand to show off the pretentious title, and the name of the author, *Dantanian Black.* "If you'll read on, you'll see that's not the original incantation. It's adapted from a Korean spell, so if it sounds unusual, that would be why. Dantanian Black, you know, the founder of the citadel..."

Severus's glare on him seemed to darken all the worse, as Gilderoy led them towards an open stretch of the castle near the walls, almost all pebbles and dust. "Seems to have had a keen interest in Korean magic and mythology. The translations are awkward, he admits as such in the text, but I assure you, I've found they work quite well regardless... at any rate, the spell calls upon the memory, of a sort, of the physical matter of ruins, to resume their previous shape. Hence why the words come out to, ah, Time-Undoing-"

"You mean *time travel*?" Severus asked, in condescending disbelief. "How does a *Ravenclaw* fail to know his *Latin*-"

Draco tuned them out as he knelt down and picked up a handful of ancient dust. It stained his palm as black as smeared ink, like it was not true dust but old ashes. When he closed his eyes, there was almost the flicker of fire behind them.

"I'll have you know," Lockhart was saying loftily, "That whatever its *linguistic* roots, it is in fact a spell of great difficulty and *power* to learn. It took me much study to even approach its mastery, and when I performed it, it was the accomplishment of a great and noble feat! Whereas..."

Draco sat in the black dust and opened the book back to the spell's page, placing it over his knees and leaning over it intently. Dantanian Black had good handwriting, with a certain flair to the slant of some letters and the tails of his *g* and *y*, but otherwise laudably clear and precise. He was also thorough. The page began with a simple, unpretentious explanation of the spell's purpose and effects, and then its origin, his adaptation process, and the hastily-derived end product. He seemed to have done all this in a rush initially, with a punishingly narrow timeframe intended for the construction of Citadelle Xaphan. Right beneath was a full description of the enunciation and wand movement...

Severus was trying and failing to get in a word edgewise against Gilderoy. "Needless to say, I will require the assistance of a powerful wizard to complete Tempus Itinerantur. As well as his expertise in Transfiguration, above any that *other* Order members seem to possess- I have seen those *lovely* rings he made his uncles, really, congratulations on that, Mr. Black..."

Draco began to practice the unusual wand motion, less a swish or flick or even a slash than a suspended, long, almost elegant series of intertwining circles. The talon wand moved with startling grace, as if trying to guide him in the motion. When he let the last of the dust escape his other hand, he thought his vision saw it aflame, for a split second. But nothing was burning. Only changing.

"I am told of his high level of magical energy, which I will need. I have not even attempted it at Xaphan, as its execution will leave even the most potent and skilled wizard positively floored by magical exhaustion for weeks on end-"

"Tempus Itinerantur!" Draco cast, weaving his wand in neat spheres through the robin-blue sky, and the dust began to move. It cut Gilderoy's patter off neatly, as the many minute fragments began to swirl in similar circles, reaching a higher speed, before the patch Draco had chosen finally reassembled itself, into an unmistakable block of crafted stone. There was even mortar oozing into life at the edges, to ready itself for more stones growing around it, like a very swift-blooming garden, soon to take their places in what had been dust and was now a stone and would soon become the base of a tower.

Severus laughed. It was startling enough to break Draco's concentration, turning to examine his godfather in alarm. Not that it was strange in itself for Severus to laugh, but this was no clipped, reprimanding laugh of derision, nor a sardonic reflection on the ridiculousness of existence. This was what Draco had heard so rarely from Severus: a genuine, whole-hearted chuckling and guffawing, deep from his diaphragm and soon shaking his stomach as it went on long and full-bodied, lips and black eyes both smiling. There was no restraint in it, no calculation, only a bright surprise, almost making him sound-

Happy? That was a word that had never belonged to Severus.

"'Much study' to learn it," Severus teased, visibly fighting back a grin that made him look a decade younger, while Gilderoy pouted and kicked childishly at the dust. "Magical exhaustion to last *weeks,* was it?"

Draco took pity on Gilderoy, as he often did. He went over and seized his blue and bronze-clad elbow, grinning broadly. "Look, Gilderoy! Look at the progress I've already made! Can you believe how fast I'm catching on?"

"No thanks to-" Severus began drolly.

"It must be," Draco said, beaming beatifically, "Because Gilderoy has been such a good teacher for me!"

Gilderoy smiled then too, and together, with Severus still laughing in the background, Draco and Gilderoy began to rebuild the tower.

Gilderoy had not been lying about the magical exhaustion. Despite his attempts to loose any bounds on the talon wand's raw power, and harness that energy exclusively, he still thought he would need more than one angel's infusion the following week, as he limped out of Severus's chambers and then the castle of Hogwarts that night. His additional exertions were rewarded by the reassuring vision of Millie and Ginny in the sky, playing Quidditch together. It was just as he had hoped to see, when he went to make sure things were going well for the second night.

Even if they did seem to be doing rather more screaming at each other than was strictly advised in Krum's manual. Ah, well, all things in time.

What did alarm Draco, and then frighten him, was the sight as he approached the castle. There was a slight figure nearby, trying to dart out of his vision. They had obviously been

spying on the girls too.

"Wait!" Draco drew his wand. "Stop, or I'll Stun you! Or worse!"

He charged through the brush and found a house elf hiding in them, cowering at his threat. "Nissy?" Draco said in disbelief, and the more delicate features of Hogwarts' most feminist house elf came into view behind the thick bushes. "Nissy, were you spying on them?"

"Nissy is sorry," Nissy gasped. "Please, Draco Ma- Draco Black! Draco Black! Please do not hurt Nissy!" She raised her hands over her head, but she was not the threat, it was her knowledge. Would she tell her brother what she had seen? Would they let it slip to other house elves? To the Slytherins?

"There should have been a Caterwauling charm," Draco said testily, not lowering the talon wand. Nissy nodded. "What, is there some special house elf magic that can pass it?" Nissy nodded again, big marble eyes widening, looking near tears. "Did someone set you to spy on them, or is this just more of that spirit of initiative that got you freed in the first place?"

"Please, Draco Black!" Nissy protested, wringing her hands. "Nissy knows Nissy is being a bad elf, but Nissy is not spying! Nissy is swearing to you, Draco Black! Punish Nissy as Nissy deserves, tell Nissy and Nissy will be hurting herself however you like, Draco Black-" Draco had scarcely ever seen anyone seem more terrified of him. "But Nissy is not a spy!"

"What are you doing, then?" Draco snapped, and she hung her head.

"Nissy is always watching Millicent Bulstrode practice," Nissy said tearfully, and withdrew something from the rags she wore: a stylized Slytherin badge that Draco remembered all too well. He'd designed it himself.

"Is that from the Kingsnakes hoodie?"

"Dobby is throwing away his, but Nissy, Nissy took the badge!" Nissy would no longer look him in the eye, she seemed so ashamed of what she had to say.

"Why would you do that?"

"NISSY IS MISSING THE KINGSNAKES!"

"Merlin, lower your voice-" Draco hissed, gesturing to their surrounds with his wand, and Nissy shrieked and threw herself to the grass outside the brush. "I'm not going to curse you, okay? Just- please, lower your voice-"

"Nissy will be quiet! Nissy is wanting to keep Nissy's tongue! And Nissy is not wanting Nissy's hands to bleed? How will Nissy work!" Nissy wailed, in as quiet distress as she could muster. "Nissy is not a spy! Nissy *loved* the Kingsnakes! So did Nissy's brother, but Nissy is loving them the *most*! Nissy is seeing Millicent Bulstrode brought her Quidditch gloves this year, so Nissy is wondering if she will still play, so Nissy followed, because Nissy is wanting to see! And Nissy is watching Millicent Bulstrode practice at night *always*!"

"You miss watching the Kingsnakes play," Draco sighed in realization, and felt a guilt so stabbing, it made him shove the throbbing talon wand into his pocket. "Bloody hell, you should have just said."

Nissy hung her head apologetically, though she probably wanted to say, *I was trying.* "I'm sorry," Draco groaned, the guilt and shame indistinguishable from each other. They were both so deep at the core of him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wrecked the Kingsnakes. I wrecked it all. I made a mistake. I know and I'm so, so sorry."

"It was the happiest time of Nissy's life," Nissy said sadly. "When we is helping with the team. And when we won the cup, and Draco Black was bringing us up to celebrate it with the players. It was the happiest of all."

"I'm sorry," Draco said again. He didn't know what else to say.

Nissy didn't answer, just bowed her head deeply, then raised her hand to snap her fingers and Apparate away. Before she could, Draco blurted, "Nissy, Dobby's birthday is this month. Why don't you come to his party? You and your brother. It will be in the trophy room after dinner again that night. It would mean a lot to Dobby. And no one has to know you were there. We'd promise."

Nissy nodded again timidly and disappeared. Draco didn't know what that meant, but at Dobby's birthday party that year, as he had hoped, Wooky and Nissy were in attendance. They were quiet the whole time, but Dobby still looked close to tears at their unexpected appearance. Particularly, Draco could not help but notice, at the sight of Nissy, whose present of a specially made gummy volcano had him clutching the little sweet to his chest like it was made of gold. When Draco teased him about it after, Dobby could only muster a small, embarrassed murmur of, "Draco Black is surely not noticing. But Nissy is a very, very pretty house elf."

Draco considered. "We're planning this horrid quadruple date thing, for Valentine's Day," he said thoughtfully. "Me and Harry, Ron and Hermione, Neville and Luna, Dean and Ginny. You and a date of yours would liven things up."

Dobby flinched. "She and Wooky is kind to Dobby today. But they is never wanting to be seen in public with Dobby. Never."

"Then ask her out privately," Draco teased. "Come on, don't you want her to be your Valentine?"

Dobby looked queasy, and shook his head resolutely. "Dobby is a Gryffindor, yes. Dobby is very much a Gryffindor. But Dobby is never, ever, ever being *that* brave."

The fast approach of Valentine's Day alarmed Draco the most when it came to his charge at the citadel. As far as Draco was concerned, his number one priority on his excursions there, up to and including ensuring a successful evacuation of children from ravenous Death Eaters, was preventing one Gilderoy Lockhart from sending a Valentine.

He and Gilderoy had gotten a great deal done that visit, nearly finishing reassembly of that greatest stretch of bleak ruins. Perhaps it was because Gilderoy had lacked distraction, with Severus gone off to talk about Order business with Sirius and Remus somewhere else. It was a bit embittering they didn't come by to say hello to their visiting nephew, however busy they were, but Draco supposed they were busy indeed. With Gilderoy tired, Draco accompanied him back to his library tower. The place was finally making Draco's skin crawl less, from enough repeated exposure. He had a task to accomplish there nonetheless, though, once they were confirmedly alone, and it was none too appetizing either. If only Remus and Sirius hadn't given Gilderoy permission to send owls.

"Gilderoy," Draco said carefully, settling them both down in some plush satin blue sofas, native to the citadel, that Gilderoy had somehow contrived to locate and clean for what he called his *salon.* "Do you know what day it is?"

Gilderoy frowned. "Oh, no, your godfather always gives me these sort of pop quizzes," he said gloomily. "If you start too, I'll be truly lost."

Draco heaved a sigh. "You do know it's February, right? And that means-"

"Valentine's Day!" Gilderoy exclaimed, throwing his hands up. "The most exciting and significant holiday of the year! A festivity honoring the most fundamental root of magic- love, the enduring and unending, a time for ornament and beauty, for verse and song, for gift-giving-"

"No!" Draco said hastily. "No! No GIFT-GIVING!" After Gilderoy didn't get progressively more overt hints, Draco was eventually forced to outright tell him, he knew Gilderoy had been the one to give Severus the golden roses and note, asking for a rendezvous back in his time at Hogwarts. And that, in no uncertain terms, Draco did not think it the best idea in the world to attempt either of those actions again. Especially the second.

"Oh, I wouldn't give the same gift twice, that would be- ah, what is the word- *gauche*-"

"NO GIFTS!" Draco commanded, trying to blast that dreamy, distant look off Gilderoy's countenance. "Gilderoy, I don't know how to tell you this..." He'd told Gilderoy before he thought Severus would never, ever reciprocate his feelings, and he lacked the will somehow to be quite that blunt again. But he owed it to Gilderoy to give him something of a warning, at least. "Severus isn't... the romantic sort. Even if you've been, I don't know, getting ideas again. I know you two have been spending a lot more time together these days-"

"We have not!" Gilderoy exclaimed, hands waving again in panic, and nearly fell off his sofa.

"Come on," Draco sighed, "I'm not blind, I've seen how often he ends up locked with you in your tower. Sometimes he says he's going to talk with Sirius and Remus, and I find him here instead. I don't know what you do in here, but-"

"Research!" Gilderoy yelped. "We do research! Nothing wrong! And frankly, it's no concern of yours-"

Draco leaned forward, only more interested given the frantic pitch of Gilderoy's denial. "Research like I asked you? Anything about the Deathly Hallows? You have been keeping an eye out for that, right? And I'd like you to look too, anything about Dantanian Noir-"

"It's not that," Gilderoy groaned. "Oh, alright, you've dragged it out of me! He's helping me with my scars!" Gilderoy wilted at Draco's skeptical look. "He- he came to the citadel, a few days after Christmas, and offered his Potions expertise to assist me."

"Why would he do that?"

"He did," Gilderoy said defensively, and unrolled the sleeve of his robe, his fur a great mass like an exotic animal on the sofa laid beside him. "See?" It did not look like any of the scars had gone, but they may have been more faded than Draco had remembered. "He's been trying different herbs and ointments. I'm sure it must seem very pathetic to you, someone who once claimed to be such a great wizard, going to Severus for help with *scars*-"

That would have been singularly hypocritical. "No," Draco said simply. "No, it doesn't."

Gilderoy bit his lip, wide cornflower eyes shining out with something almost still like innocence in them, despite the words he had to speak. "Seguinus," he began. It was the first time in a while Draco had heard him speak the name, and it had a strange sound on his lips. "He... he didn't turn me into a vampire. But he did... he gave me blood. His. Should I have told you? I'm sorry if-"

"It's okay. Don't worry, Gilderoy."

"He did it to keep me alive," Gilderoy murmured, voice gradually going softer and thinner. "He said that. To keep me- useful- for as long as I was. Said I wouldn't have survived half as long, otherwise. He would bite his own wrist and put his own blood in the wounds after- after. It would stop them bleeding, close the wounds, and he said it made me stronger, made me more beautiful, and that it- bound me to him. He wasn't the only one who- bit me, but- the marks you saw, I knew you saw them- those were just the ones Seguinus left. None of the others stayed, but- those just don't change."

It sounded a bit like the talon brand. That was almost an interesting enough thought to distract Draco from the thought of just how many other marks had been on Gilderoy that *weren't* there anymore.

"I don't know if Severus has changed that," Gilderoy whispered, "Or just the color. But I don't think he'll be able to change... did you see? The real mark, the one that Seguinus called his claim... it's his initials, on..."

"I saw it," Draco said, feeling a sudden wave of nausea come to his throat like he might be ill then, like had gone to the ocean and the sea had not wanted him there. "I saw- SS."

"It's not the worst initials," Gilderoy said, raising his dry eyes with an admirable attempt at levity. "SS can be, er, at the start of a ship, right? I don't know why. And it's, well- it's funny, Severus wants to get rid of that the most, he said it's- barbaric and unbearable, but- it's his initials too. It's a waste of time in a way. Sometimes I *have* thought... not from Seguinus, and

not carved into me, but- another way, thinking of those two letters as *Severus Snape*- it wouldn't be so bad, to have that on me- but I'm rambling, and you don't want to hear that sort of- perversion-"

Draco rolled his eyes, leaned into the light, and pulled forward the rose gold letters on his necklace to show Gilderoy. Characteristically, it took him far longer than anticipated to make out the HJP and comprehend its meaning, but he did eventually. "I understand," Draco said, and Gilderoy pulled his sleeve down.

"I would never send him anything," Gilderoy said, voice less distant but still eerie, unearthly. "I would never *try* anything- never dare to offer myself to anyone, let alone him, with that mark carved on- with all of Seguinus's marks on me."

"Because you don't think you're desirable," Draco said sympathetically, "Or- I don't know, worthy anymore? *Gilderoy*-"

Gilderoy blinked rapidly. "Draco," he said softly, and for once, he sounded older than his age. "I know you understand- *some* things, about Castell de L'Infern. More than anyone else alive does. But if you- if you knew everything, you would know that I can *never* feel that. Any of that, not at all. Never again. With or without the marks."

Tony and Padma ended up joining onto their massive group Valentine's date by the time it arrived, much to Harry's glumness. "You put more effort into Luna's birthday party than Valentine's Day," Harry complained in his ear as they began their mass trek to Hogsmeade.

"As well I should," Draco said serenely, "Nothing but the best for COUSIN-"

"Neville already got her those lilies," Harry said distractedly, looking back jealously to where Luna was holding Neville's hand in one hand, and a mixed bouquet of Eurydice lilies and Juliet roses in the other. "And anyway, this is our first Valentine's Day together. I had thought we could make it, I don't know, special-"

Harry had gotten the message, finally, and dressed up for a date. He'd clearly consulted with Sirius, and looked downright rakish in a green silk shirt, tight black trousers, and of all things, a long black leather coat. He would have looked unbearably silly, if he didn't seem to be getting more good-looking on a daily business. Roughly proportionate with the number of times they had been fully together. Draco could feel the evidence of it as he walked, the ache he had come to miss when it was gone. He thought dreamily for a second about what they would do after the group date was done, perhaps renewing that ache, and watched Harry's sullen profile admiringly until Harry scowled at him.

"Are you listening, Draco?"

"You don't think it's special," Draco laughed, "Going out at Madam Puddifoot's, together, you and I, in front of the whole world? My, Chosen One, your standards *are* inflating. I should have known that when I let you have *everything* you liked, your ego would inflate to-"

"I just wish it was just us," Harry whispered. "It wouldn't matter where we went then."

"After we have lunch with our friends," Draco began, only to break off at the sound of Ginny's voice, furiously bellowing. It was familiar, after a few more times spying on her and Millie now and again, just to reassure himself. *What, it's not weird if Nissy's doing it with me...* He almost wondered whether the back of their party had been waylaid by an incursion of Slytherins, before he heard Dean bellowing back, and realized it was Ginny's boyfriend this time receiving her sharp tongue.

Dean's was nearly as sharp back, as halfway along the path to Hogsmeade, seemingly out of nowhere, all of their many grievances seemed to be spontaneously unfolded. They didn't seem to care about their friends around, with Padma Patil looking particularly mortified to stand there at such a scene being stared at by every passing student, on Valentine's Day no less. Ron was not short in intervening, alternating between trying to defuse the situation and snapping at Dean himself for being like this with his sister. Dean claimed she'd pushed him to it, that if she found him dull, well, he found her dull, and inattentive, and on and on...

Draco was almost relieved when they broke up, screaming their desire never to see each other for the rest of their natural lives with great confidence, for two people who shared a common room. Dean stormed away, in search of Seamus to judge by what he yelled at random passerby on his way out. Draco was further relieved that his still nascent friendship with Ginny was not nearly firm enough to make him expected to help comfort her.

It did mean Luna's Valentine's plans were curtailed after all. Ginny was led off protectively by Hermione, Luna, and then a glum Padma seeming to feel the obligations of her house and gender, with the girls calling out to the boys that they didn't know when they'd be back. Heartbreak, it seemed, preempted tepid group romance. Even if Ginny looked less upset than the other girls, before they receded from view.

Ron, Neville, and Tony were none too pleased with Harry either, when the Boy Who Lived did a singularly poor job pretending he wasn't excited to spend Valentine's Day at Hogsmeade alone with his boyfriend. He led Draco away victoriously, only stopping long to ask Neville what that bouquet he had gotten Luna was, a bouquet Neville was now left holding forlornly by himself. Neville told Harry, understandably, that it was made of Mimbulus Mimbletonia. Draco and Harry both gave their best impressions of being apologetic before racing off into the proverbial sunset.

It was still morning, as a matter of fact, just nearing noon, which gave them all the time they could want to spend a romantic day together. With Draco's illegal Apparition ability, moreover, they could spend it wherever they wanted. It puzzled Draco, then, for Harry not to lead them first to some lover's paradise, but to a shop. At least the choice of shop was readily understandable, though: Dogweed and Deathcap, where Draco made Harry laugh by earnestly attempting to order from the shopkeeper a Mimbulus Mimbletonia.

"Remember what one did to your hair?" Harry murmured, breath hot and delicious on his ear as they stood watching the florist assemble his actual order. "I spent so long clearing out the gunk..."

"And you loved every second," Draco drawled, bumping his hip against Harry's. "You don't need to go to all this trouble, you know. You've already got me, you don't need to woo me with flowers-"

"I wanted to," Harry muttered, ears turning red behind recently tamed dark hair that the wind had turned wild again. Draco kissed his ears before taking the bouquet of red and pink carnations from the florist. Harry had awful taste in flowers, of course, but Draco somehow found he didn't mind.

Harry was the one to frown, after paying, when Draco began to order flowers too. "Are you getting me a bouquet too?" he asked, eyes going wide. "I didn't expect- and I wouldn't need a whole bouquet- maybe just a single flower- like, er, a golden rose- but- wow, that's, er..."

He did not seem thrilled at the sight of the giant sea holly, with its frayed and pointed petals and its center like a large mutant raspberry. Only its violet color could be called pretty, and even that wasn't suited to Draco's purposes. He would have preferred it more grayish-silver, like some thought some sea holly had. But otherwise, the structure and texture reminded him of what he remembered of Maledictum.

"It's not for you," Draco laughed, "And if you want a proper golden rose, like second year- did you keep the Snitch you caught against Slytherin?" Harry nodded shyly, as Draco paid for the holly bouquet. "Then when we get back to Hogwarts, I'll transfigure it for you," Draco promised, and was rewarded with an adoring smile. It was only as they left the shop that Harry thought to ask who the flowers were for.

"Do you mind a quick stop," Draco said apologetically, "Before romance? It's just- being at a flower shop, I couldn't help but think- it would be good if I- but I don't know- it was stupid-"

Eventually, Harry managed to pry out of Draco, both by reassurance and tracking the path of their footsteps towards the outskirts of Hogsmeade, that Draco wanted to go to the graveyard. Not to stay at all, especially not after what had happened the last time. Just to make a stop, and leave the holly at Periander and Maledictum's graves.

"It's not stupid," Harry said, "It's wonderful," and took Draco's hand. Draco leaned his head on Harry's shoulder, breathing in that ever-perfect Amortentia scent, and felt the most in love he had ever been. Except it dropped away only seconds later, when they rounded the corner to the path out of Hogsmeade and found themselves abruptly not alone.

The first face Draco made out was Astoria Greengrass. He thought it was her sister at first, perhaps because she had grown still more, or because her face was made-up, eyes lined, with her lips the same elegant dark crimson as her robes. Her slight figure was supporting a far taller, broader one, a boy in plain black with his face buried against her shoulder. It was half in her thick dark hair, much as Draco often buried his face in Hermione's for comfort. The boy was crying, harsh sobs audible in the still February air under a fully gray sky. The sound of the sobs was not very familiar, but only because their owner had not cried in front of Draco very often. Even before Harry's sound of surprise made the pair turn and part, Draco somehow knew that the boy crying on Astoria's shoulder would be Theodore Nott.

Draco grabbed Harry's arm hard, to make sure and keep him back. But it was as much to keep himself steady, as Theo's face turned towards them so slowly it was like something out of a dream. It was red and blotchy from crying, for what looked to have been some time. His sandy hair was mussed from where Astoria had been stroking it soothingly. A few strands hung in his swollen blue eyes, and that gaze did not focus, not on Harry or Draco, through them both, before Astoria seized him and led him away.

What Draco remembered after was not Theo's blank face, but Astoria's. It was the look she gave them before she pulled Theo back towards the bustling streets of Hogsmeade, not the hateful stare that Draco had expected. Not at all. The face of the Kingsnakes' little prodigy Chaser was flushed from the cold, jaw and lips clenched so tight they were white, and her dark eyes were holes in her face. It was a look of absolute and total fear.

For what or whom, Draco couldn't tell.

Harry tried to speak to Draco on the path to the graveyard, wondering absently whether Theo had been following Draco again, turning up around them like this near the same place. But he couldn't account for Astoria's presence, nor the tears, and came around to thinking it an unhappy accident. Draco wondered the same: whether Theo and Astoria had gone for a date on Valentine's Day, and then Theo had been somehow overwhelmed, by grief or some other feeling, so Astoria had taken him where she didn't think they'd be seen for him to cry...

Draco was barely looking where he walked even as they walked past rows of graves, nearly stumbling against a low grave marker he hadn't seen, and then a large clumped pile of dirt. Harry made a warning noise, trying to pull Draco back, and Draco dropped both bouquets of flowers into the open graves.

There was one headstone for Periander, but there had been two graves, and both seemed to have been emptied. There was a hole for both, more than six feet deep, the earth looking unsettled. Whether it was from above or below, the grave looked forcefully dug, perhaps freshly opened. It looked empty, but for Draco's flowers- except there was the corpse of Maledictum still there, further rotted, it was just Periander who was gone-

"Draco, don't! Wait!" Harry yelled, but Draco had already jumped into the grave, to seize the rotting body of Maledictum up in his arms. Somehow, he landed on his feet, but the earth still seemed to break apart and careen around him, dirt loosening along the walls of the pit and under his feet.

It had been a mistake on his part, or a trick of the light. What he had thought a mass of ruined feathers was just the holly he himself had bought, freshly fallen into one side of the grave. Harry was yelling above him, but Draco couldn't hear him. All he could do was see, as he gathered the two bouquets for the two empty graves, and saw beneath where Harry's had fallen, a flash of sullied white.

It was a note, a large one, smattered in filth, but perhaps charmed to remain still uncovered, however one may choose to climb down into its home, or perhaps even rebury it. Draco's first thought was that it was some explanation or apology for the missing bodies, like some sort of macabre I.O.U. It was plain parchment, like you could get anywhere, in uniform block handwriting Draco didn't recognize. Perhaps to ensure it caught the eye, for whomever it was

meant, but it was far larger than it needed to be, to contain the few words it did. There were five only.

Your godfather is a liar.

Draco screamed. He pushed the note into his pocket where he didn't have to look at it anymore, and pushed his filthy hands in his pockets to feel his dagger and wand, and screamed.

"Draco!" Harry came sliding down the side of pit, far more gracefully than Draco had done it. He helped Draco climb out, picking up the flowers for him. He might well have left the purple bouquet. "Draco, what is it? What's wrong? What happened to the graves?"

"Harry," Draco said, breathing heavily through his mouth, "Harry, I need to find Severus."

Harry frowned. "Do you think he's in danger?"

"Yes!" Draco shrieked, so angry at Harry he could have taken the moonstone dagger and cut him open.

"We have to find him, then," Harry said, always at his best in a crisis, and Draco felt he had already fallen apart, like the words had already shattered any fight in him. *They know. The Death Eaters know he's been lying to them. Voldemort knows he's a traitor. Maybe Theo left the note, and fucking* felt *bad- maybe he didn't- but whoever did, they know, Aunt Bella knows, they're hurting him if he isn't dead already- but no, they'd want to make a show of hurting him so much longer first-*

He'd seen Severus in Defense yesterday. That might not have been enough of a window to satisfy Voldemort's appetite. But then again, it might have been. It depended on the level of creativity.

"Get Hermione!" Draco screamed, and wrenched himself from Harry. "I'm going to find him! Get Hermione and everyone you can trust and tell them we have to FIND HIM!"

Harry didn't seem to want to let him go, but he did. When he ran, it was in the direction of Hogsmeade. Draco ran in the opposite direction, towards Hogwarts. The note seemed to be burning at him in his pocket. He still cast cursory water and cleaning charms as he rushed faster and faster, knowing delay for admonition or curiosity would waste more time than this. He was panting, wishing he had still been playing Seeker to have more stamina, but even still, he didn't know if he could have breathed.

He nearly broke the vials in hand as he drank them rushing down the dungeon steps, nearly slipping with his muddied boots, skidding the last way down licking the drops of calming potions that tasted like grave dirt. Maybe he should have gone straight to McGonagall for help- Dumbledore didn't occur to him as an option- or Ginny would be in the castle, he could have gone to her, but he ran alone instead down the path his feet knew for him, to Severus's office, his storeroom, then his chambers, during which he realized he had sent away the person with the fucking *Marauder's Map-*

Draco Black, great dark wizard of his times.

He hadn't gotten any better in a crisis after all.

Severus will die because you're so fucking stupid-

Draco went to McGonagall, as he should have right away. She looked appalled at his frantic rapping at his door, and then at his still rather disheveled appearance. "Mr. Black? What is the meaning of this?"

"I can't find my godfather," Draco gasped. "Do you know where he is?"

McGonagall's face changed to sympathy, though she still looked at him sternly behind her spectacles. "You mustn't panic like this, Mr. Black. Your godfather told us at breakfast this morning that he would be helping at Citadelle Xaphan today as well-"

"Thank you!" was all Draco managed to yell at her as he raced away, towards the first staircase *up.* It occurred to him after that maybe he should have given her the note, or asked if there was some direct way to communicate with Xaphan that Dumbledore had kept from them, because he *would*, it was Dumbledore- but it was almost as fast to just-

Draco found the Room of Requirement and paced and paced, *I need a way out I need a way out I need a way out-*

The room understood him. When he was let in, he could see the passage to the Hog's Head already opened.

Draco was sorry, as he stumbled in, to lose his balance, and smear the dirt on his hand on the painting of Ariana Dumbledore. But at least he caught himself enough that it was only the frame- as if that mattered now...

He Apparated the moment he was out of the wards to the citadel. He needed to warn Severus *now*.

He appeared outside the library tower, where he thought Gilderoy was likeliest to be, and wrenched open the door, the words calling for him, asking if Severus or any of the others were there right on his tongue. But Gilderoy wasn't there. Draco could have set the whole tower alight, but then he heard the sound of muffled voices. Very muffled, enough to make Draco fear differently. If the Death Eaters were *here*-

The voices were coming from the direction of Gilderoy's secret room. Gilderoy wouldn't have taken anyone but Draco in there willingly. Draco knocked on it, unable to keep track of the number of times as he gasped out, "Toujours pur," and almost laughed hysterically as he wondered, there had to be *some* way to change that password-

Draco followed the voices through the room, and found them behind yet another door. He was almost certain once he was close enough that one was Severus, dark and harsh and curt, and the other Gilderoy's, lilting and whining. The rush of relief just to hear Severus's voice

nearly floored him, before he remembered that might not actually be *good* news. He pushed open the door as softly as he could, wand and dagger drawn, in case they weren't alone.

They were alone. There was no one there but them, and they didn't see or hear Draco coming in. They were both on their feet in a room Draco had never seen, only a single lantern on the floor casting high shadows up towards the cavernous obsidian ceiling. It was a completely plain room, same for huge tall squared forms that looked not be alive, though who could be sure, indistinguishable but for slight gilded glints off their sides in the dark. Draco could breathe again, even as the wand in his hand pulsed so hard it was nearly painful. They were there, they both looked unhurt, and as they so often did these days, they were arguing.

"I know *why*," Gilderoy was saying, in a very uncontrolled, rash tone. "I *know*, Severus! What I'm saying is it still just doesn't feel right!"

"Ah, yes," Severus growled, softer but with far more menace behind it, "Far be it from me, to allow the prospect of my godson's future to interfere with your *feelings* on the matter-"

"He's been kind to me, Severus!" Gilderoy exclaimed. The sight of him throwing up his arms cast a shadow like gargoyles taking flight with so little light and so much shadow. "Kinder than I ever thought- kinder than I deserve!"

"He interfered for you, yes, and perhaps you are right to feel some debt to him, apart from the Unbreakable Vow," Severus snapped impatiently. "But that does not mean that *debt* necessitates full and complete *honesty*-"

"It's not just that- he's been- and he asked me about Dantanian Noir the last time I visited!" Gilderoy protested. "I'm not a good liar-"

"I had thought history had shown you to be an *excellent* liar-"

"Not anymore!" Gilderoy exclaimed, and Severus leaned against a stack of books, face half-shadow with the half showing a frightened grimace. "After what you showed me in the Pensieve, to convince me he *couldn't* know about Dantanian- Severus, how am I supposed to look him in the eye again, knowing everything, and- I called you here because I think when he visits tomorrow, we should *tell* him-"

"We will do no such thing," Severus said flatly. "Do you not believe I act strictly in my godson's best interest? No one must ever know of this. *No one.* Not Black or Remus, not even Albus Dumbledore, do you understand me, Gilderoy? And not Draco. Never Draco. If Draco knew- Gilderoy, I know him better than you. You have seen him only at his best. Your savior. But I have seen him at his worst. I know who he is, better than you ever will, and whatever your conscience tells you, you *must trust me.*"

Gilderoy stood there, looking paralyzed by the torrent of words. Perhaps by the logic he looked to hear in them. Draco waited, hoping against hope that Gilderoy would keep protesting. But he could finally only stand and watch as Gilderoy closed his eyes and nodded in acquiescence.

"Good," Severus said crisply. "We are finished, then-"

The talon wand, still in Draco's shaking right hand, caught alight. At least it seemed to. It was only a light like Lumos, though strong enough to suffuse the entire room with the brightness of the surface of a sun, too much light now. It was only the *color* of fire.

Draco didn't have to say a word. Both men turned and saw him then. Gilderoy shrieked and stepped back. Severus's hands both went to his mouth, in some kind of utter shock or dismay or fear, worse than Draco had ever seen him wear. Draco could see it on his face, what Severus could see on his. Severus knew, without having to ask, that Draco had heard them.

Gilderoy had to ask. "What- how much did you hear?" he gasped.

Enough to hang you, vampire's whore.

But the words stayed in Draco's head. He only said the first of them. "Enough."

Severus shut his eyes.

"What is it," Draco began, "That you have seen, that you know, that you have kept from me, about *Dantanian Noir*?"

There was one thing right before his eyes, with the room alight. The tall shapes were paintings, Muggle paintings that didn't move. The canvases were different sizes, though all were large, with the look of magical preservation on them with their gilt frames perfect, every feature of every picture punishingly distinct now, though uncannily frozen. Uncanny, because the pictures were in flight. Every painting was beautiful. Draco could see, once he stepped closer, scrawled across the bottom right corner of all of them-

Every painting was signed *Dantanian Noir.*

And there it was.

Your godfather is a liar.

Astarte Noir, Part One

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Thanks so much for all your comments and best wishes!

Anyway, please again note the warnings in the tags and at the start of the book. They're all going to come into play coming forward. Please be careful.

Anyway, please enjoy! We're getting to the pointy end! <3

Playlist

The paintings were all of dragons. More than half of them wore a glimmering Patronus-blue or metallic violet or steel-snow glow that marked them as Antipodean Opaleyes. It was all Opaleyes in places of prominence, closer to the door. White opal glowed around the feet and the sides of both traitors. "You said, Gilderoy," Draco prompted, forcing patience into his voice when burning was all the wand in his hand seemed to have on its mind. "I heard you say something about a Pensieve. Something Severus showed you."

"Draco," Gilderoy said helplessly, deflating like some puffed-up Muggle parade float when the party was over. "I wanted to tell you- wanted to from the moment I found- materials, but Severus saw them first, and he told me it would be for your own good to keep them from you-" Severus shot him a sharp glance and his mouth shut.

"For my own good? You're like Dumbledore, aren't you! Oh, yes, Dumbledore will hold back information from anyone, because he knows best- but you! *You*! You knew something about me- my wand- *Dantanian*- tell me what it is I'm not supposed to know!"

"Calm yourself," Severus said, composure drawing around his harshly lit form like a veil. "We should go elsewhere to speak. You should not be wielding- if that is flame at the end of that thing- around relics..."

"It's too late," Draco laughed, feeling hysteria bubble at the edges, fingertips threatening to sizzle with fuzziness. "I've already seen the name on them. Dantanian Noir. So is that the same as Dantanian Black, if his things are at Dantanian Black's castle?" He was met with two blank stares. "Oh, come on, Gilderoy, didn't you tell me you learned French? No matter how dumb you like to play it, even you can't get away with pretending *noir* isn't French for *black*-
"

"It is not," Severus said crisply, "That simple. Nothing is that simple." He took Draco's shoulder with no fear for the weapons in his hands, and led both him and Gilderoy out, room

after room, until they were out of the very flammable library tower, and into the midday air. It felt hideous to be in so much sunlight.

"Tell me what you know," Draco said, "Or I'll find a way to take it from you."

"Are you threatening me?" Severus said, unimpressed. The situation would have felt like two imposters playing the Draco and Severus roles, rather than themselves. Except Severus, look as he did just like the godfather Draco had trusted above all others, was already an imposter.

Draco was the one still himself, who had to face the reality of someone else entirely before him than he had believed.

As he had in third year, when Severus sent the Aurors after him, when he laid the trap in his quarters for Sirius and Stunned Draco, and why after that was Draco still surprised? Why had he let all that happen and forgiven Severus without so much as an apology, why did he never *learn-*

"Severus," Gilderoy said nervously, "That knife, you said-"

All three of their sets of eyes dropped to Periander's blade. It shook as Draco turned it over in his palm, the true moonstones with only two missing glimmering in the unforgiving sunlight. "What?" Draco demanded. "What about my *dagger*?"

Severus's unhappy dark eyes flitted with calculation, before he reluctantly admitted, "Do you recall that I went to Pammaque Periander's house, in the summer after the Dark Lord rose, and found him dead, with a will bequeathing this dagger to you?" The facts were not unfamiliar to any of them, it seemed, from Gilderoy's anxious face not changing. "The dagger was not the point of the gift."

"So what was there," Draco hissed out, baring his teeth, "At the dagger's *point*?"

"At its hilt." Severus waved his wand. Draco nearly dropped the dagger as the hilt opened, two elegant halves falling to either side like unfurling wings. There was a large-looking space in between, currently empty. "I tested the present for you- for its safety- and discovered that the dagger had more concealed within it. Pensieve memories."

"Whose?" Draco closed his hand into a fist. When he opened it, the dagger had shut, as if there had never been a hinge to open it. "Who's seen them? You? *Gilderoy*? Who else? If Periander left them to me, why didn't you-"

"Draco," Severus said, with a gentleness that made Draco angrier, "None have seen them but I and Gilderoy. Gilderoy only to ensure his cooperation, once I realized there were vital materials in the citadel. Not merely the paintings, but books and journals, all of which I have since destroyed."

Draco wanted to scream out obscenities, as nasty and evil filth as he could muster. But there was nothing in his mind even close to as cruel as he wanted to say. "Why? You- you knew things about my wand since before *fifth* year- one and a half *years* you've known, and you've

just- been my godfather this whole time, while you were *keeping* this from me, destroying the evidence-"

"You will not understand this," Severus said flatly, "But I have done this *for* you. I would have given you the memories if I had thought they would be safe for you."

"Safe?" Draco echoed incredulously. "*Safe*? What about my life these past years has been *safe*? Do you think after what happened to Mr. Nott because of *this wand*, it was *safe* to keep me in ignorance? *Why did this wand make me*-" Severus shot a warning glance at Gilderoy, and Draco laughed, shrill and unpleasant. "Why shouldn't he know? He knows everything else. That's- fuck, that's why you gave me that *assessment* when you gave me the dagger. For *dark* magic. You said you were worried about my wand! Merlin, why didn't I realize something had changed-"

"I was studying the... problem," Severus said, even and controlled, "As I have been dedicated to since I discovered it in the dagger. I have undertaken research on this- retracing steps you took, it seems, in New Zealand, along with others of my own- and with books found at Xaphan-"

"You mean books Gilderoy gave you that you *burned*-"

"I stand by my decision. Everything I have learned has reaffirmed it was the right one. If you expect an apology, vain boy, you shall not have it. Everything I have undertaken, I have done to preserve you-"

"Draco, perhaps you might put away your wand- or- the blade- or, um, not point them at your godfather so, er, energetically-"

"What, Gilderoy, would you rather I point them at *you*-"

"Put them away, godson-"

"Fine!" Draco shoved the two fatal lying weapons into either pocket, as he faced the two fatal lying men. He pulled his last weapon out, one he understood rather better. "Did you keep the memory?"

Severus looked to be regretting that. "I needed to return to it frequently, to make reference to my research, and then to ensure Gilderoy would-"

"You are going to come back to Hogwarts with me." Draco felt a numbing calm wash over him. "I presume that's where you keep it. You're going to give it to me. For good-"

"I am truly sorry, Draco, but that is simply not ever-"

"It's a trade, if you'll listen." Draco shoved the envelope at him. "Read it. I have copies."

Draco expected Severus to be surprised he had something this damning on his *benefactor*- it should have been the only satisfaction left to him, to wield this one blunt piece of soft power again, with more confidence it would actually do something. But he'd not thought Severus

would be *this* stricken, face falling open nearly as much as when he'd realized Draco was listening.

"Wait, are you serious?" Draco gasped. He couldn't hold back his hysterical laughter then, nearly tripping as his boots slid over uneven stone. "You didn't know? *You* didn't? I thought you were the one who knew the most about him! I thought he'd have told you! He expects you to die for him, and he never even told you about *Grindelwald*?"

"What?" went Gilderoy, trying to look over Severus's shoulder. Severus gently pushed him aside, not looking up from the page.

"Gilderoy," Draco sighed, "Why don't you go into your tower and think about what you've done. You can't imagine how little this has to do with you."

Gilderoy adjusted his fur, and then the clasp on his hair, nervously fussing with himself as if his outer cleanliness could affect what Draco thought of him now.

"It was all a lie, wasn't it," Draco said with a start. "Needing to help more with the citadel's reconstruction, that was just an excuse to get Severus here, to research, once he found out the place could be *useful*. And you- you and him- the helping with the *scars* and that. You used that, used pity- the time you were spending together, it was just *collusion*-"

"He did try and help a bit," Gilderoy said defensively. "You saw they've bettered. And it was my idea he claim to be meeting your uncles while we were working, and he would go back to the library by himself to read- if you have to blame anyone, blame me-"

"Oh, very brave," Draco sneered. "What a hero you are, Gilderoy Lockhart! Why are you wearing the colors of Ravenclaw? With such selfless *courage*, surely you should be in the red and gold of Gryffindor-"

"Draco!" Severus crumpled the letter in his palm. "What *is* this?"

"Let's start going back to Hogwarts," Draco said with ostentatiously false brightness, "Godfather and godson trip, how lovely, and I can explain to you who it is you *really* follow..."

Severus's eyes were not accusing, just assessing. "You've been keeping secrets too."

"Not about you!" Draco protested, although objectively, even that wasn't true. "Not like this- it doesn't matter. Come on."

Draco took Severus's elbow, much as the touch made his gut broil with nausea. Gilderoy stepped up wringing his hands, the comical wide-eyed panic of ignorance no longer so cute or funny. Draco was ready to Side-Along Severus if he didn't come with him, but Gilderoy touched Draco's other arm, stopping him. "Don't- don't go- Draco, please, wait just a moment, I'm sorry, I know it was wrong I didn't-"

"No, Gilderoy," Draco said, with exquisite, icy reserve. "And to think I thought you experiencing a crisis of vocation. I think it's *admirable* you've returned to what you do best.

Lying."

Gilderoy's mouth shut.

"Hogsmeade, Severus. Behind the Hog's Head."

When Draco Apparated, Severus was barely a second behind him. He started speaking frantically in Draco's ear as they went around to the front, crumpled letter shoved into his pocket. "Draco, where did you get this- are you certain it is *real*-" Severus's eyes shot up as they went into the pub, to fix on the slumped form of a clearly drunken Aberforth, groggily serving one of his few grubby customers behind the bar. His spectacles threatened to slip off into the mead, before he clumsily righted them.

Trust Severus to instantly hit at the true source, whereas even Dumbledore had not realized, or at least not confronted Aberforth about it. Draco had been in contact with Aberforth regularly, mainly through Dobby, and a confident false smile and a nod in Aberforth's direction were all it took for Aberforth to let his ally, and his ally's godfather, walk right up his steps and into his private domicile.

"Slow down!" Severus hissed, seizing his arm almost painfully by the wrist, and Draco tried to draw whatever enjoyment he could out of Severus's agitation. Even that was progressively emptier, when he could only stare at that face he had so worshiped and wonder, *Who* are *you*?

"Don't touch me." Draco wrenched his arm away. "And don't forget your *place*. Right now, I am the one asking questions." Severus followed towards the parlor, looking around with an interest that suggested it was his first time there. When they arrived at the painting, Severus got to see the large streak of dirt over the frame, and the filthy footprints.

"What happened here?" Severus's eyes turned on Draco keenly as they stepped up to Ariana Dumbledore. "Why did you even come to the citadel on a Saturday-"

"Did you not just hear me when I told you *I* ask the questions? This is *blackmail*, Severus, can a man of your *variety* of experience be so unprepared for the concept? Now, if you'll follow me- follow *her*, that is, come *on*-"

"That's Ariana," Severus observed distractedly, "Dumbledore's sister-"

"Yes," Draco growled, "And he might have murdered her when he was seventeen. Now, are you coming, or do you want the world to know that?"

"What?" Severus grabbed onto the doorframe to steady himself. *He never knew*, the awareness swept through Draco's body in a rush of visceral misery, though he did not understand why he felt such sorrow for Severus still. *He followed Dumbledore's plan to the letter in the blue loop and died doing it, never knowing who Dumbledore really was.*

"Blackmail, Severus," Draco reminded him, frustrated that everyone seemed so far behind his train of thought=, when he was the one who'd discovered himself totally in the dark, about *himself.* Severus followed at a clipped, automatic pace, reasonable enough. Draco still kept

snapping to go faster, until they reached the Room and then Hogwarts and its staircases down.

"You mean to blackmail Dumbledore with this?" Severus was breathing hard as they rushed the way Draco had gone reverse, almost as hurried. "Whatever the *meaning* of this letter- the consequences for the Order, if suspicion of this caliber was publicly raised against its leader-"

"No, Severus, I'm blackmailing *you*," Draco said bluntly, storming into Severus's chambers towards the Pensieve. He felt an affronted yet amused disbelief, that Dumbledore hadn't even told Severus, that Severus's own godson had tried blackmailing the headmaster first. "I'll trade this letter and the destruction of all its copies- I have a linked Vanishing spell to them all I'll trigger once I have what I need- for that vial. Which was already meant to be mine. Really, you should consider the deal a steal on your part-"

Severus caught himself at the broad rounded stone edge of the Pensieve, staring at Draco like they were dueling and he needed to find an opening to make his escape. "You would not do that. Not to the Order. Not to your uncles, or your friends, or your lover Potter-"

"I would, though," Draco said, not without a sense of astonishment at how true it felt. "I think I really would. It's enough, Severus. It's enough now. I've tried the being good and all that. I *have* tried. But I think... that's enough of that now, don't you?" Draco gripped the other side of the Pensieve as they stared at one another. "So give me the vial- and I'll *know* if it's the wrong one- or I ruin Dumbledore. I do as much damage as I can. Unless this letter has you shocked enough that it turns out, that's what you'd want too."

Incredibly, Severus hesitated. "The things he spoke of. Those words about dominance over Muggles, for their own good. Does he still believe in them?"

It was an amusing temptation to lie, but Draco didn't. "How should I know? But if he does," Draco said archly, "He's certainly spent however many, many decades it was, since his sister died and Grindelwald dumped him, acting in a way entirely opposite to them." Severus's eyebrows raised at the word *dumped*, clearly wondering if that was just a colorful phrase or an implication. But they really, really weren't here to satisfy any more of *Severus's* curiosity. "So yeah, it *is* a 'soldier for the light', or whatever tripe that lot believe about themselves, that you'd be helping to take down. So? Vial or ruin? Decision time." Draco snapped his fingers. "Chop chop."

Severus reached into his own bloody robes pocket and, unbelievably, drew out a large, clouded jade-green glass bottle, which could have passed for a Potions vial. "I carry it on me," Severus said weakly, "So that if I die, this memory dies with me." *Oh, yes, telling Gilderoy was a very intelligent decision towards that end.* "This is what I found when I opened the dagger." Draco reached for it, and Severus held it back. "Destroy the copies first."

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

Severus scoffed. "Insolent boy. Do you think *I* am-"

"Don't call me boy ever again."

They waited at the Pensieve, a silent stand-off, until Draco's impatience got the best of him. "Fine!" He made a show of casting, "Evanesca Catenata!" He had a brief flash of ruefulness, as he felt the invisible links to himself dissipate, wondering how stupid he had been to destroy them for real. But he wanted the vial too badly, and he was afraid that if he tried to fake it, Severus would know, and then he never would-

"There!" Draco snapped. When he lunged and snatched the green vial, his godfather- no, he shouldn't think of him as that anymore- the Defense professor didn't try to stop him. All he did was take the crumpled original letter out of his pocket, and set it aflame with one wave of his wand.

"What is wrong with you?" Draco hesitated over the Pensieve in disbelief. "Did you even get to read it properly? Let alone remember anything from it? Don't you care what it says?"

"I presume," Severus said, with a dull hopelessness in his black eyes, "That should I have any further curiosity, I would do best to direct my inquiries towards the proprietor of the Hog's Head."

Draco might have screwed Aberforth over, but it hardly seemed to matter. He just lifted the vial and uncapped it.

Severus made one a last attempt to forestall what he had so labored to prevent. "Draco, there are good reasons to leave this alone. Let me destroy this memory as well. Once you see it, you *will* wish you had not. You will wish you had listened to your godfather, for once in your life, vain- oh, please, Draco, don't look in it. Please." Draco forced out a contemptuous laugh, at the horrible sound of Severus's voice breaking as he begged. Severus gripped the Pensieve edge tightly again, fingers and knuckles on it going death-white. "Draco, it will destroy you. *Please*-"

Draco snorted. "Kill me while I'm looking at the memory or not," he said, "It's just more of the same," and emptied the vial into the basin. His attempt at devil-may-care toughness, though, was quickly ruined by the sight he caught of the glass. "Wait, what is this?" He held it to the light, turning it sideways, and presented the letters written along it accusingly. "If you deceived me *again*-"

"This is the vial-"

"Then why does it say Dorian? Who the fuck is *Dorian*?" Severus looked as though he might have laughed at that, in a very different circumstance. "A Dorian is a fruit!" Draco whined.

"Or some variety of musical mode, I am given to understand," Severus intoned, quite bleakly. "I believe these memories were intended for a person called Dorian to see. Much as Periander attempted to leave these memories to you. Once you have seen, you will understand."

Draco took a deep breath, put the vial aside, and pushed his head down into the shimmering water.

The first thing he saw was the Opaleye. The whirling through the Pensieve had taken away all of Draco's sense of directions and perspective, so for one spine-chilling moment he thought it was a real dragon, thought he was seeing Astaroth himself. Then he saw the dragon was all blue and silver, swooping around inside a house, and it was not much bigger than a small child that was giggling and chasing it.

"I can't catch it, Maman!" the child exclaimed with glee. It was not immediately clear looking whether the child was a boy or a girl, with long curly dark brown hair streaming around the flushed laughing face. What was clear was that the woman, with a wand in one hand and a paintbrush in the other, was the child's mother, with her own longer mane of matching hair, and the same large deep dark eyes with thick dark lashes like long brush-strokes. There was the rough beginnings of a dragon on the easel in shades of violet and opal, with storm clouds behind it.

"You're not supposed to catch it, my little prince," the woman laughed, and the child, apparently a boy, gave up the chase to run to her side, clinging to the side of her long black skirts and lifting his eyes up to her adoringly. "It's not for you to play with. It's for me to paint." The boy made quizzical, incoherent sounds, which she understood easily. "This is a magic spell, darling. It's called a Patronus." He pointed to the painting instead, seeming to find it more fascinating up close than even the magic. "It's a commission."

"You paint lotsa dragons," the boy said happily, tilting his head and scrunching up his little face as he made the attempt to study the painting more critically.

"Well, some nice man is already paying Maman for this painting," the mother said, and put down both the brush and wand on the end of her tall glossy redwood easel, to lean down and smooth the curls out of her son's face, and give him a kiss on the forehead. He squealed, arms waving, and she nuzzled at his hair until he wiggled about babbling protestingly, and she let him go with a last wet smack.

"Ma*man*!" he whined playfully, shifting from foot to foot, but when she turned back to her easel, he quieted reverently, settling himself to watch her like even at his young age, he was used to and fond of this amusement. The Patronus stayed in the air, remaining corporeal, eventually coming to hover beside the boy, whom he slightly exceeded in size. Every now and then, the woman would look over to her docile Patronus and son, both seeming well-trained and glad for her attention.

The boy could have been anywhere between three or five. Draco had no eye for children's ages. The woman was easier to place, relatively, as older than he was but not too much older, likely early twenties, although the old style of her clothes might distort that. She was covered from the top of her neck to the bottom of her boots in sweeping black crepe, with navy at her tall collar and waist sash and the thin ends of her puffed sleeves, pushed back as she became more involved in her painting, mixing an already-prepared opal shade with a deep indigo. The boy brought her each paint with contented ease, and he beamed as she praised him each time, telling him he had an artist's eye when he brought her a bit of deep purple, to finish her new shade once she was left frowning at the mix of just two.

She was beautiful when she smiled at her son, but she was a woman who would likely be beautiful with any expression on her face. She bore a passing resemblance to Bellatrix

Lestrange, with her wild dark hair and those half-lidded, ever-sultry dark eyes, but she was younger than Draco had ever seen Aunt Bella except in pictures. She bore a stronger resemblance to the memory of Sirius as a teenager that Draco had seen in Severus's Pensieve. She was lovelier than either, her hair silkier and falling more in ringlets than snarls, picking up a glow from her dragon Patronus that turned it raven each time she moved. Her skin was strikingly pale, milky and smooth with a sort of pearl luminescence of its own, but not some poetic alabaster, with the flush that never seemed far beneath the surface either, a delicate rose that gave life to her delicate features, lips like a rosebud, eyes as she focused on her work strikingly keen and hawkish, something between a doll and a bird of prey. Eventually, her Patronus went up in the air, prompting sad noises from her son, but he eventually quieted, eventually sitting himself on an ottoman nearby he pulled closer, to watch in more comfort.

Her hair still gleamed strangely, sheens of gold across it from the shaded windows and lit candles. What Draco had taken as an apartment seemed more like a flat, in some old version of genteel poverty, of the bohemian sort. The emphasis there would be on the genteel, not the poverty, with the many artistic trappings turning the small place into something from the Arabian nights, but more varied in style. Between loose-hanging tapestries with beasts on them that Draco could not name, there were all sorts of oddities and eye-catching things that must delight a young boy clearly fond of art already.

One could hardly decide where to look, whether a twisted, overgrown bonsai tree decorated in hanging wrought-iron lanterns, paintings of ruined castles whose style clearly marked them as the mother's, and uneven piles of Persian carpets across the hardwood that young feet could surely only have run about over safely before with the ease of long practice. The furniture was all deep blue and bright bronze, lived-in but tidy with small curiosities on the tables, statue busts or little bowls of powdered candies, animal skulls or unnaturally-colored bottles of mysterious liquids, all shone through by the room's glittering air of filtered gold. Eventually, though, one's eyes would always settle on the painting, which was beginning swiftly to take shape.

Swiftly because, in fact, despite the Muggle style of painting, with no seeming intent to ever bring the dragon on its canvas to life, the mother would put down her paintbrush now and then and to take up her wand as another brush. When she waved it across the canvas, the still-drying paint would move, reshaping itself seemingly to the contours of whatever image she held in her mind. She did not need to utter any spells, only level her large almond-shaped eyes closer to the paint and wave her hand. The boy clapped each time she did, despite the sight seeming familiar to him.

"Maman," the boy said eagerly, "When will I be able to do magic like you?"

She smiled fondly and knelt down to put them at the same level, putting her black walnut wand in his hand. He studied it warily. "Can I use this to make a dragon?"

"My little prince," she said, shaking her head in proud amazement. "So precocious. I'm sorry, darling, you're too little. When you're older, you will."

She took back her wand and resumed her work, and the boy stood there pouting, until at last he climbed on the ottoman. He watched her as she manipulated the paint with her wand, raising his own small pale hand and copying her motions with obsessive attention. Finally, he

leaned forward and moved his hand behind her, staring at the rough outline of the dragon's wings.

The paint blossomed out larger, wings expanding so quickly it was like the dragon was unfurling them. The mother let out a discontented murmur. "Hmm. Merde. I didn't mean to-" She looked behind her and saw her son moving his hand. "Dante!" she exclaimed, shocked but excited, and threw herself to her knees again to grab him and encircle him in her arms. "Dante, darling, did you do that? With just your *hand*?"

'Dante' shrugged, little face once again pouty and cute. "It wasn't *hard*," he whined, and she hugged him tighter.

"Your grandmother was right," the mother said fiercely. "You're special. Look, just like the flames in the lanterns... you are a prodigy already, Dantanian. You will be *great.* It is just as she foretold. You *are* the rightful heir to House Black. The flames told true!"

"I don't understand," whined Dantanian, and pulled at her skirt peevishly. "I don't understand, Maman."

Her eyes shone out from her pale face, lovely and triumphant, like a pair of bright dark stars. "You will, my little prince. Don't worry, you will. Maman will teach you everything."

The flat shifted and flooded with brightness and then shadow again, as the surroundings changed to a torch-lit tunnel. If Draco had not gone to Paris on more than a few vacations with his parents, he would not have recognized his surrounds as the catacombs. Especially since they were not just rough historical tunnels, only impressive at the parts where smoothed stone gave way to ossuaries, but a bustling underground marketplace. The tunnels were full of wizards and witches, though more of the former, strolling, selling, and buying between booths and tables that stretched as far as the eye could see in the either direction.

Dantanian's mother was leading him by the hand to one of the smaller tables, almost concealed behind a pair of larger ones selling books. She was dressed more formally, with a large bustle on her skirt that rendered her silhouette more formidable, while Dantanian clung to her hand. Dantanian seemed tempted by the magical books, but she kept firm hold as she guided him up to the rotting wood and attracted the attention of the seller. He was an old wizard in tattered old dark robes, his purple-mottled aging skull sprouted with a thin, balding curtain of stringy dark gray hair- enough hair, though, to thread it through with any number of jade beads, which clinked together as he straightened his head. "Marie?" he said intently in French. "Marie Weston?"

The mother seemed to suppress her annoyance. "Marie is my mother, Berfrid," she answered patiently, in fluent French. "My name is Astarte. Astarte Noir. We've met before. I've bought skulls." That seemed improbable, given the wall behind them was made up entirely of skulls, but maybe some of the animal skulls in the flat had come from this unusual table. The cages there were all shut, but muted squeaking and bawking and hissing emanated from them in a low collective murmur of discontent. "I've come because I've heard a rumor you've come by a-"

"Dragon egg!" Dantanian exclaimed excitedly, seeming to recall their mission then. His French sounded native like his mother's, as his English had too. He bounced a bit, waving his arms in the air, before a sharp glance and a finger to Astarte's lips hushed him. "You've gotten a dragon egg to sell," he whispered in English. "Maman, can we buy it? I want it. I want to raise a dragon!"

"Right, Astarte, I remember," Berfrid said, eyes running over Astarte's body shamelessly. "You have her look. Though not that golden hair of hers. She was fair, you're dark. And she didn't have a body like yours," he leered, eyes burning into her shapely figure, settling for a time on her full breasts beneath her dress, then on her corseted waist and broad hips. "She was more beautiful," Berfrid concluded after, despite his visible appreciation. Astarte suffered this remark along with his inspection in silence, though she looked to have experienced it more than a few times. "And she could look in the fire and tell you what was coming for you-"

"Grandmother was a py-ro-man-cer," Dantanian announced, prompting another finger to the lips from Astarte, as the French *pyromancien* echoed nearly as loudly along the stone and bones as *ouef de dragon* had. "Sorry," he whispered, ducking his head, but the show of repentance gave way not a second later as he looked back up and snuck closer to the table again.

"Yes, my mother could read and control the fire," Astarte said, "And I cannot. Might I see the egg, Berfrid?" He hemmed and hawed but finally obeyed. Both of Dantanian's hands slapped down on the table's edge, threatening to upset one of the closed cages, once Berfrid withdrew a similar closed crate from beneath the table, and withdrew the promised egg from it. It was the right size for a dragon egg, and would indeed be hard to mistake as anything else, with its distinctive layering of rounded scales, gleaming an iridescent white like fine jewels before its backdrop of skulls.

"Opaleye!" Dantanian hissed, eyes and voice brimming with longing. "Maman, Maman, please, can I have it, I'll hatch it, I'll take care of it, please, you say I'm the heir to-" She touched his shoulder at that, giving him a far sterner look than she had yet delivered him. He hastily shut his mouth, as if aware he had nearly publicly said a secret he could not tell. "It's an Opaleye egg," he said more quietly.

"No," Astarte said, narrowing her eyes in disappointment. "Swedish Short-snout, is it?" She took her son's hand as if already preparing to lead him away. "Darling, an Opaleye's egg is actually rather plain. More like a normal egg, just very large. Berfrid, I'd heard you had an Opaleye."

"This is an Opaleye egg," Berfrid insisted. "One hundred Bezants and he's yours."

Dantanian still looked a bit hopeful, but Astarte shook her head, looking like she couldn't believe what a sucker the man thought her. "I was only interested in an Opaleye," she told him. "Thank you for showing me, though. Always a pleasure, Berfrid." The man did not protest as she and Dantanian made their leisurely way off, through the market towards the distant sunlight that foretold an exit.

"Was he confused?" Dantanian asked her as they walked. They seemed to default to English when it was just the two of them. That would make sense, living in what must be Paris, if the intention was for Dantanian to be fluent in both. "Or was he lying?" He looked to have implicit faith in his mother's ability to identify dragons.

"Lying," Astarte said contemptuously. "What a waste of time. The egg was fake too, of course. That much was obvious, especially after I heard the price. But I had hoped for a good fake, to use for a sketch for my painting."

"Would he have let you draw the fake egg in your notebook, Maman?"

"Certainly," Astarte said wryly. "He has done so with several other items, quite gladly." Dantanian made his childish confused noises. "Since it also lets him stare and study *me* at his leisure." Dantanian made no less confused noises. "Because he thinks I'm beautiful, my love. Stupid men will always want to be close to a thing that the world has decided is beautiful."

Dantanian considered. "Dragons are beautiful. Like that fake egg. Would Mr. Berfrid want to be close to his dragon, once it was all grown up?"

Astarte grinned at him with unbelievable brightness, her pearly white teeth flashing at him. "There are different kinds of beauty."

Dantanian still seemed thoughtful. "You are beautiful, Maman. Both ways. But he said your mother was *more* beautiful?"

Astarte laughed and urged him to walk faster. "That's not saying much. No one was more beautiful than my mother, or more gifted or clever. That's why your grandfather-"

"Cyg-" Dantanian began, proud to recall the name, only to remember discretion and go on tiptoe to whisper in her ear, "Cygnus Black?"

"That's right. That's why your grandfather Cygnus Black chose her," Astarte whispered, then straightened. "Well, we're near the Ministère des Affaires Magiques building, darling. Why don't we stop and take a walk about the entry halls, you always enjoy that-"

"No I don't," Dantanian whined brattily, "I never did, you just thought I did when I was little 'cause I couldn't talk." To make his point, he stopped before one of the tables near the exit, which was selling wizarding paintings, tableaus of Paris streets. The closest was a vision of the Champs-Élysées from another century.

"All the paintings there are boring. They *move.* Look at this!" He gestured to the Champs-Élysées as if the presence of strutting promenaders and rattling carriages, flowing in opposing file down the muddy boulevard, was some kind of crime.

Astarte tugged him hurriedly past the affronted artist. "Don't offend strangers. We're going to the Ministère. Or we could get you a haircut," she teased. "So you could look like the Muggle boys when I let you out to play..."

"NO!" Dantanian stomped his foot. "No cut! I wanna look like MAMAN! And I wanna see paintings in the Louvre instead! Why do wizard paintings have to move anyway?"

"You've got it backwards," Astarte laughed, leading him hand-and-hand up a tall stone staircase. "Wizards ask, why don't Muggle paintings move? Magic is what makes paintings move, so they think Muggles don't make moving paintings just because they can't. They wouldn't understand my paintings *not* moving, you know."

"Paintings aren't *supposed* to move," Dantanian insisted, then frowned. "Why don't yours, then, Maman?"

"I think it's more beautiful that they don't," Astarte explained, with conviction on her lovely face. "You can look and see the world moving all the time. It's far rarer, to see it completely still. We live in a world where time passes. Paintings are in a world where time stops." Dantanian didn't seem to understand fully, but he didn't make his confused sounds, just listened raptly. "I think it's incredible, when a painting can capture a moment in time and keep it frozen. Turn an instant into eternity. That's magic, too. Just a different kind."

"A different spell?"

"No. Muggle magic. Human magic," she laughed, and ruffled his long hair. "Beautiful things don't last forever. Not even beautiful mountains. *Nothing* is forever. Even my sort of paintings. Even preservation spells won't keep them intact *forever*. But I think it's close enough to eternity."

"We live in the Muggle world, Maman," Dantanian said slowly, looking to try and show off his understanding, "Because you like to do Muggle art, and not wizard art?"

She let out a short, surprised laugh, which she seemed to try and take any curt irony from. "No, my little prince," she said, and knelt down there for that moment on their stair step, in between the many people streaming up and down past them. "We live in the Muggle world because we are exiles."

"When will we celebrate my birthday, Maman?" Dantanian was already whining as the Pensieve resolved into the picture of an older boy and woman, in a colder season. The window shades were all open or put aside, with the glass catching the glare of sunlight off white-covered city streets, snow still falling in soft flakes down from the pure white sky.

"I just want to capture the look of the snow with the light like this," Astarte called from her wooden bench, where she was bent mixing a number of paints with gentle frustration on her face. "I can't seem to get the right color."

Dantanian pouted, wandering about the room with aimless discontent, the picture of the gracefully spoiled child. His curls were longer, bound behind him with a white ribbon. He pulled out the ribbon and offered it to his mother. "Like this?"

"No, my little prince," she said, patting him on the head, and took the scrap of velvet to re-tie his hair. "People say 'blanche comme neige', but even snow isn't actually a pure white. Especially not in Montmartre."

Dantanian seemed to sulk, then went over to a smaller window, dragging a small ottoman with him to stand on. In the time between memories, they seemed to have acquired roughly three times more blue and bronze ottomans. He pushed open just the bottom of the window, with great difficulty for delicate-looking small hands. It was enough for him to take two handfuls of snow from the windowsill. He winced at the cold, but stared at the top of his little heaps in fascination, the parts not melting, as if trying to understand the color for himself.

Except there was a simpler way for Dantanian. He shifted the snow all to one hand, then picked up an empty wooden mixing bottle. He let the snow slide carefully into it. It seemed a charming childish fantasy. Until the snow turned into paint in its confines, the precise shade of white that it had worn on the window.

"Here," Dantanian said solemnly, carrying the bottle before him with both hands, and held it up to her back. "Happy birthday."

"It's your birthday, not mine, Dante," she laughed, and he shook his head.

"No, if it's my birthday then it's your birthday too," he said stubbornly, and held up the bottle higher. "I made this for you. Happy birthday, Maman!"

"Did you mix this?" she marveled, "It's perfect, you're getting better than your maman already," and he shook his head honestly.

"No," he said, "I made it from the snow," and she looked impressed, though not nearly as impressed or surprised as she might have been.

"Wandless Transfiguration," she mused. "My boy *is* getting so grown-up! Seven years old! I can't believe it!" She put down the paint on her stand. "This will keep, darling. Do you want to open one of your presents now, to reward your creativity?"

Dantanian scrunched up his face. "I want cake, Maman."

She frowned at him in her facetious sort of sternness. "Dante, it's not even noon."

"I made your paint," Dante whined, "And it's our birthday, and I want us to have our cake."

"Very well," she laughed, "As my little prince commands," and led him into a small kitchen. She took a cake from a magically cold-looking icebox, and cast a wordless charm that seemed to warm it to perfect temperature and texture again. It was quite a lavish cake, with its swirls of chocolate and stiff cream whimsical and outlandish- *Merveilleux*, it was called, this kind of meringue, either atop or comprising the entire 'cake'. From the bakery box nearby on the counter, she had clearly not baked it, but Dantanian still couldn't have looked more excited, as she artfully arranged six blue candles on its tallest peaks.

"Light it, Maman!" he exclaimed, and she pulled it to her side protectively.

"Not yet, darling, you know what's first," she said, and he followed sulky but obedient as she carried it over to a small but antique-looking kitchen table set, where they each assumed what were clearly their dinner chairs. "And no setting it on fire yourself this time! You have to pass your test."

"I know," Dantanian sighed, eyeing the merveilleux with such greediness, it seemed there was room for little else in his head. "My name is Dantanian Noir, my mother's name is Astarte Noir, my grandmother's-"

"Wait," she said, with her sternness suddenly no longer playful at all. She picked up the cake, put it back on the counter, and then leaned across the table to regard him seriously. "This can't be rushed, remember? Wait for my questions and answer them. What is your name?"

"Dantanian Noir," Dantanian answered, toying one of his curls around his fingers until his mother's eyes went there and he stopped fiddling.

"What is your mother's name?"

"Maman," he said cheekily, then quickly added, "Astarte Noir," when her frown deepened.

"Why are we called Dantanian and Astarte?"

"Because they're family names," Dantanian said as if by rote. He seemed to have to recite this every birthday, before he could have his cake. "They're the names of fallen angels. I am called Dantanian after the founder of Citadelle Xaphan, because Grandmother saw in her flames that I am the true heir to House Black, and I will own the castle of Xaphan one day. Where Grandmother used to live."

"Is Astarte the name of a fallen angel?"

"No," Dantanian said confidently, "Astarte is the girl way to say it. It's a goddess. They took the angel name from her name. The angel's name is a family name."

"What was your father called?"

"Jackson Shaw."

"And who was he?"

"A Muggleborn wizard. A painter."

"What was my mother called?"

"Marie Weston. Because she was Muggleborn."

"And what was she?"

"A pyromancer."

"Who was your grandfather?"

"Cygnus Black."

"And was he married?"

Dantanian instinctively pouted at this question. "Yes."

"Which makes me what?" Astarte asked, no shame in her eyes, only steel.

Dantanian didn't seem to like to say it. "A bastard."

"And why is our last name Noir?"

"Because we're not allowed to use the Black name. Because we're not- legible-"

"Legitimate, darling. The word is legitimate. You're legitimate, or you're illegitimate. A bastard."

"Le-gi-ti-mate," Dantanian sounded out, though it still seemed hard for him to pronounce. "And Grandfather did not want to anger his wife, so he sent Grandmother to France. He wanted her to call you a Weston. But she gave you the Black name in French, and he could not stop her. That is why we are Noir, and why our sigil is the Black greyhounds in- intro-"

"Inverted," Astarte finished for him eagerly. "Colors turned inside out. In-*ver*-ted. Good. Good, you're remembering well. Much better than last year." Dantanian preened, not without a furtive glance towards the merveilleux. "Just one more thing, my love. Why are *you* the rightful heir to House Black, if your mother was a woman and a bastard?"

Dantanian thought hard, but when he remembered, he said the answer with pride. "Because I am more powerful." She gave him a pat on the head for his correct answer. "I proved it the day I was born, when my magic set the Muggle hospital on fire and killed all those people by accident." He looked sadder. "And Grandmother."

It had never seemed to occur to a boy so young, to question how a woman who controlled flames could have died in a fire.

"Yes," Astarte sighed. "You don't have to put that part at the end. Good, my love. You know who you are. Now it's time for the heir to House Black to have his *favorite cake*!"

Dantanian bounced in his chair, beaming again, as she brought the cake back over, and lit the candles with her wand. "Blow it with me, Maman!" he called, and whined until he got his way.

"Alright," Astarte laughed, "But make a wish too," and together, they blew out the candles, and blew the memory away.

Dantanian was older as he came down the spiral wooden stairs, pulling up his hair behind him, still in his nightshirt. "Maman," he whined, "Why didn't you wake me? It's all bright out. I thought we were going to go see the Carnaval again today..."

The streets were colorful with the Carnaval de Paris behind the glass windows, once Dantanian went and pulled the shades down, still having to use ottomans to reach high enough. "Maman," he called, "Where are you? We were going to buy masks for the Rue Saint-Antoine! Ma*man*..."

Dantanian treaded about the room, looking about for explanation, only to stumble, right below a now long-finished painting of the Montmartre streets covered in snow. There was red across the brightest light on the painted snow.

Dantanian looked down and screamed. He tried to run back and fell, hitting the wall and skidding to the ground, bare small pale feet wet and slippery. They were also red, and soon, the bottom of his legs and nightshirt were too, more white turned to red. He did not seem to understand what he had hit, what he was seeing, nor did he seem able to make himself look at it long. He was breathing hard and tears filling his eyes, clearly occluding his vision, but he still covered his face, with hands reddened by trying and failing to catch his fall. He cried hard enough then, such unrestrained and broken wails from behind his hands, that it seemed impossible it not be heard somewhere by someone else, if it had not been Carnaval.

Dantanian did understand, though, or at least he came to, piece by piece, peeking out through his small red fingers. "Maman?" he whispered. "Maman?" Slowly, fearfully, he reached out and touched the face that lay just beside where his had fallen, white and bluing at the edges, truly alabaster, none of the rose flush there remaining, nor the hawkish keenness in those thick-lashed almond-shaped dark eyes, left forever open. The face was frozen in what looked strangely like a smile, chapped blue lips curled up at the sides, above the black gash that was the dried blood of her slit throat.

"Maman!" Dantanian screamed, touching her dead face, and pulling at her blood-stained ringlets. "Maman, wake up!" It was patently impossible, of course. Even if her neck had not been cut open clear to the tendons, the head was one of the most intact parts left of her. Everything else had been left in pieces. "Maman! MAMAN!"

He didn't seem to think to go for help. He just shook her head, and then her hand, which came off the ground with him alone. He dropped it with a screech and began to sob again, tears streaming down onto Persian carpets stained in drying red, while the sounds of Carnaval went on jauntily outside. "MAMAN! MAMAN! Please, please, Maman..."

The memory ended very quickly, as if the one remembering had not wanted to linger on it a second longer than he must.

"Dan?" A kindly, elderly female face came slowly into view, from blurred into clarity, although there was still a lack of sense to it, the consummately normal arrangement of features and expression. "Your name is very long. Did your mother ever call you Dan?" Dantanian shook his head, staring up in confusion at the English-speaking woman crouched over him in the crisp, plain, clean reception room, something universal about it marking it even in this century as a hospital. "Did anyone else?" Dantanian shook his head again.

"Danny, then. Danny, my name is Elizabeth Shaw. I'm your grandmother." She straightened enough to gesture back at the elderly man standing at some distance behind her, broad honest face set in wariness. He was also gray-haired and dark-eyed, dressed in shabbier, more British-looking clothes. "This is Frederick Shaw. He's your grandfather."

Dantanian blinked rapidly. He did not look much older, if any, but there was a limp oiliness to his long hair, and a deadness to his entire face. His eyes and face were swollen red to the point of bloodshot with sobbing, though any tears on his face looked dried. "My grandmother's name," he recited, voice dazed and slow, "Is Marie Weston. She was a pyromancer."

"A what?" Elizabeth said doubtfully, and exchanged telling glances with her husband. "Oh, is that- a kind of witch?"

"A witch like your *mother* said she was?" Frederick asked, tone barely holding back contempt, and Dantanian's eyes only seemed to focus at the word *mother.*

"She was a witch," Dantanian agreed, "And she's dead."

"You can have more than one grandmother, sweetheart," Elizabeth said, crouching down to hug his shoulders. He didn't flinch back, but he didn't return the affection either. "I'm your *father's* mother. You never knew your father, did you?"

"My father's name was Jackson Shaw," Dantanian recited. "He was a Muggleborn wizard and a painter."

"Wizard? What kind of nonsense is that?" Frederick barked, walking over to ensure the door to the small sterile room was shut. "My son was *normal.*" He seemed to try and put a paternal kindness on his own face, as he crossed back and sat beside Dantanian, giving him a tentative smile. "Don't worry, son. We're normal too. We've heard what happened to your mother. Whatever she did- whatever she *was*- we are sorry, Danny. It seems that now, we are the only family you have left. How old are you precisely?"

"Seven," Elizabeth answered for him. "Don't speak ill of his mother, Fred, I know she was- but- he's young enough that he doesn't have to- well, he can-" She bent low, to talk right to Dantanian again. "Danny, you don't have to worry. You aren't alone anymore. Your family has found you. We're going to take care of you."

Dantanian's face was very awake, and flinching with distaste, as realization came over his face. "That's right, if he was Muggleborn, you're *Muggles*, aren't you?" They didn't seem to know the word. "*Moldus*? You can't do magic, can you?"

Frederick looked annoyed, but Elizabeth touched his elbow and forced her own smile. "Neither could your father, sweetheart."

"That's not true!" Dantanian protested. "My mother told me! He was a wizard-"

"He was just an ordinary painter," Frederick said, voice heated, "Who- passed, three years ago, because-" He seemed to regain his self-possession. "Listen, son, I don't know what your

mother told you, but the truth is, your father wasn't a- witch or wizard or any of that. The only magic person we ever met was- Astarte. *Her*."

You would have had to be deaf to miss the loathing in that voice. "No," Dantanian said, with utter conviction, and pulled himself back from Elizabeth. "She wouldn't lie. Not to me. She never lied. You're the liars. You probably aren't even my real *grandparents*-"

Elizabeth took Dantanian's hand and pulled him firmly back to them. "We are, Dantanian. And we-" She shot a nervous glance at her husband, but he sighed, and nodded in acquiescence. "We've already decided that we're going to adopt you-"

"No," Dantanian said immediately, and Frederick seized his other shoulder.

"You're coming back with us," he ordered.

"To Paris?" Dantanian said bleakly.

Elizabeth widened her forced smile. "No, sweetheart. To Staffordshire."

The last memory had cut off quickly and abruptly, like it couldn't end soon enough. It faded out with Elizabeth's face, which turned once again to Astarte's, frozen and unmoving. Except Astarte's was painted, and unmoving.

Dantanian sat on the floor with a candle in his hands, closer to a Hogwarts first-year in age than the little doll face he had worn in the last mirror. His hair was still long, its dark curls looking more like his mother's, silky and curling up in natural ringlets too, which still made him look much like a doll. He was wearing plain white pajamas, in a cheaper-looking fabric than anything he had worn in Paris, in a cheaper-looking room. The only similarity was that it was filled with paintings. It was an abandoned studio, the lifting of the candle showed, with a coating of floating dust over everything. It lacked any of the preservation charms that Astarte had spoken of, though except for a few exceptions near the back, every painting there was of her.

They were in a different style than hers, more impressionistic with dimmer colors, though it was immediately obvious it was her. She had been painted at every possible angle, in what seemed every conventional portrait scene and then a number more unconventional ones, hair up in some, down in others, but always thick-lashed and sultry and beautiful beyond measure. Her beauty would have been eerie in the candlelight and dust even had she not been dead, and the painter who had catalogued it so obsessively dead as well. The pictures bore the signature of Jackson Shaw. On a nearby painting of Astarte naked over crimson sheets, she was smiling, expression provocative and welcoming, but Dantanian did not seem to either particularly notice or avoid it. His attention was fully caught by the one he had settled before, like a fully fixed Mirror of Erised.

She was in the flat of old memory, in a dress like then but in shades of red. She was standing before a canvas of her own, painting the view from an opened window: another familiar sight, of the Montmartre streets covered in snow. This canvas rendered them in miniature

with Astarte the artist as focus, full profile of her face visible, though turned away from her portraitist. Dantanian seemed content to sit and stare at it forever.

Then the door to the abandoned studio had slammed open, light flooding in from the hall, and there were hands seizing Dantanian. He was too big to lift, but they dragged him bodily into the hallway, where Frederick and Elizabeth awaited him, dressed in pajamas identical to his, but with faces full of not nostalgia but fury. "Daniel!" Elizabeth bellowed, shaking his shoulders once they had him out in the light. Frederick went to take Dantanian's candle and put it out. "Daniel, how many times do we have to tell you? DO NOT GO IN THERE!"

Dantanian's face was devoid of shame, nor did he look frightened or particularly surprised to have been caught. "If you don't want me to look at my father's paintings," Dantanian said unrepentantly, "Then why are they still there?"

Frederick was coming back, and flinched, pain breaking out on his face nakedly, while Elizabeth scowled darker. "Because they were *his*," she said fiercely, "And now they're all we have left of him-"

"Except for Danny," Frederick reminded her, and her forced smile wore miserable eyes.

"Yes," she said unhappily. "Except for our Danny- wait- Fred, look at his *hair*-"

Frederick's facade of calm momentarily cracked too. "No! It's grown back!" he exclaimed, lowering his candle and squinting to see the despised-sounding dark mane. Dantanian actually seemed to smirk, or at least look very satisfied with himself. "Son," he said gruffly, "I've told you to stop doing that-"

"And I've told you, grandpa," Dantanian said impatiently, "That I can't *control* it. That's not how magic works. I won't be able to until I'm trained-"

"If you wanted to have your hair short like we wanted," Elizabeth lamented, hands trembling on Dantanian's shoulders, "Short like a boy, so you would look like all the *other* boys, and they wouldn't tease you anymore-"

"They don't do that anymore," Dantanian said quietly, but neither seemed to hear him.

"Fine," Frederick groaned, and raked his free hand back through his graying head of hair, candlelight illuminating the fine wrinkles on his aged face. He looked near the end of his tether. "Alright, you can't control that. But we lock the studio every night- we've put in so many different locks, and they never work against you. You *can* control going back to the studio over and over when-"

"If you let me take a picture of my mother for my room. Just one..."

Frederick looked at Elizabeth for a moment pleadingly, but she shook her head hard. "No, Daniel, you shouldn't keep dwelling on her like this. It's not healthy. And you're British now, and you're *our* grandson, you should be less like her, and more like your father-"

"What," Dantanian said coldly. "Should I kill myself like he did too?"

Frederick stepped back, looking like he had been punched in the gut, while Elizabeth let out a shrill scream and shook him. "What are you talking about, Daniel? How many times have we told you, your father died in an *accident*-"

"An accidental pistol to his head," Dantanian said, sounding bored and sleepy. "I've read all his journals in the studio too, they have all his plans for it and everything. He couldn't handle my mother leaving him when she got pregnant with me, so he killed himself. I know what that means, I'm eleven- *ah*!"

"Elizabeth, don't," Frederick said, his voice half-hearted, as Elizabeth raised her hand to backhand Dantanian once more across the face. The second sent him to the ground. He let out a muffled noise and pushed his hair out of his eyes, looking up at his guardians with cold resentment.

"Don't ever say that again!" she screamed. "It's not true! Demon child- devil! DEVIL CHILD!"

"Elizabeth, go back to bed," Frederick said gently, "I'll put the boy to bed-"

"He has to learn his lesson, for once-"

"Elizabeth, it's his eleventh birthday," Frederick sighed.

With a frustrated whimper, Elizabeth obeyed. Frederick made a show of inspecting Dantanian's swollen eye in the mirror, apologizing and promising Elizabeth wouldn't do it again. Dantanian listened with a detached air like he had heard it all before, and was just waiting for Frederick to leave. Once he was gone, Dantanian leaned forward eagerly in the mirror.

He ignored his bruises completely. "My name," he recited softly, "Is Dantanian Noir. My mother was Astarte Noir. She was a painter. She was perfect. My father was Jackson Shaw. He was a painter. He was a Muggle. My grandmother was Marie Weston. She was a pyromancer. My grandfather was Cygnus Black. He was the Lord of House Black. I am the rightful heir to House Black, and to Citadelle Xaphan. I will live there someday. My grandmother saw it in the flames..."

Dantanian looked months older, with that rapid growth that could happen in fits and starts at that age, with his hair still long in the next memory. Elizabeth handed him a letter addressed to him. "To Daniel Shaw. Is this the letter to the wizard school you've been expecting?" she asked tiredly.

"Beauxbatons!" Dantanian exclaimed excitedly, and tore it open without looking. "My mother went to Beauxbatons."

Frederick looked up from his eggs. "Jackson said she was expelled from school."

"That's right," Dantanian said happily, "She was expelled from Beauxbatons. At fifteen. And now I get to go there too!" His smile faded only a second later, when he read the contents of the letter.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Phineas Black

Dear Mr. Shaw,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been awarded a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary tomes and equipment.

Term will begin on 1 September. We await your owl by no later than 31 July.

Yours sincerely,

Abernathy Nott

Deputy Headmaster

"What's wrong," Elizabeth said worriedly. "Didn't make the cut?" She sounded devastated at the idea of not being rid of him for months as planned.

"No," Dantanian said, as Frederick went over and tried to read over his shoulder, eggs forgotten. "It's for a different school." He turned to them accusingly. "Why would I be invited to the British school, instead of the French? I was born in Paris-"

Frederick frowned. "We registered you to the authorities as the son of our son Jackson Shaw, and an unknown mother. He was a British citizen, so you are as well-"

"A *Muggle* British citizen," Dantanian said viciously, "*Daniel Shaw*," and stared hatefully at the name on the corner of the envelope. Perhaps he had expected the letter to also hold his true name. Then his eyes went to the top of the letter again, and he traced the headmaster's name, Phineas Black.

"Will you write back to them," Elizabeth asked anxiously, "With this- this-" She eyed the post owl very dubiously. "You should accept. Right away. Before they change their minds."

"Why would they change their minds, Elizabeth?" Frederick asked, and Elizabeth jerked her head towards Dantanian, as if to say, *Look at him.*

"Of course," Dantanian said calmly. "I'll go get paper."

The world blurred and reformed into the floating candles of Hogwarts's Great Hall. Even in another century, there was little difference visibly apparent. The uniforms were different, with more ornate flourishes on the robes, ties more silken, and the girls' skirts down to their ankles. But the professors looked the same, save that only one or two were women- in one case it was scarcely distinguishable- and the headmaster looked just as expected as well, presiding from his high seat and staring down at the arriving first-years with a suspicious snarl. His was a face that had stared out at Draco from paintings in both Dumbledore's office and the entry hall of Grimmauld, except this version, even from a distance, was clearly younger. Something about the melancholy air he brooded down at the students seemed meaner as well.

Dantanian was amongst the students, staring at the floating candles in awe. He was by himself, though surrounded by knots of chattering children, dressed in robes with his long hair pulled back with a black velvet ribbon. His hand went into his pocket- he seemed to be nervously feeling at his new wand, to check it was still there- and he stared at the ceiling until a voice forced him to stop.

"Bonsoir," said an affected young voice, and a small pointy pale face inserted itself between Dantanian and the lights. "I didn't see you on the train." The boy was very blond and slender, though taller than nearly all the students around them, and had his silky silver hair cut neatly just above his shoulders. A few other boys flanked him, with more ordinary faces. "Were you hiding?"

Dantanian met that sneer. "No," Dantanian said, looking him in the eye without any interest. "I was at the back. I was sleeping."

The blond boy didn't seem to know what to make of Dantanian. "What's your name? I'm Dorian. Dorian *Malfoy*," he bragged, "And *I'm* going to be a Slytherin, what about you?"

Dantanian didn't have to stop to consider. He'd clearly planned this answer already in his head. "My name is Daniel Shaw," he said calmly, "And I don't know what house I'll be in, because I'm Muggleborn."

The boys behind Dorian broke out into derisive laughter. "Why are you even talking to him, Dorian?" one of the dark-haired ones cackled, and Dorian's curiosity turned at once to showy contempt.

"I didn't realize," Dorian said icily, "I thought he was pureblooded, because he had long hair," and followed his friends away. Dantanian didn't watch them go. He looked back at the ceiling.

"Students!" called an elderly voice, as a man with a striking resemblance to Cantankerous Nott walked out before them, and began the procedure for Sorting much like McGonagall always did. Dantanian seemed to visibly not be listening, either because he had already read about all this, or he just simply didn't care. He only began to pay attention when the Hat's

song ended, and the students began to be called forward, name by name. There were many familiar ones, some less so, but none of the names were particularly interesting until the M's. "Malfoy, Dorian!"

Dorian had a clasp on the back of his hair in the shape of a green snake, so it was clear where he expected to go. But the Hat sat on his head longer than it had for anyone else, by far, remaining still there for over a minute, long enough the hall began to murmur, the Slytherin table more so. By the time the hat yelled out, "SLYTHERIN!" Dorian practically sprinted over to his friends there, he looked so relieved.

When they got into the N's, Dantanian got a look of slight consternation when Professor Nott went from Nettle to North with no Noir in the middle, before seeming to recall he was a Shaw.

Soon after were the O's and P's, which included another notable name. "Periander, Lamia!" A tall, broad-faced girl with raven-black hair strode forward, taking a seat on the stool with a fearlessness that seemed to know where she would be Sorted already. And the hat barely touched her head before it exclaimed, "RAVENCLAW!"

"Perianders always go in Ravenclaw," one of Dorian's unsorted friends told another.

Finally, Nott yelled, "Shaw, Daniel!"

Dantanian walked forward, with a restless tension that showed he must have already read of this ceremony, to have been so outwardly cool . When the Hat was placed on his head, Dantanian folded his hands in his lap and sat up with good posture, as if that would impress it.

"Hmm..." the Hat mused, and Dantanian started, nearly jumping out of the stool at the sound of a voice in his head. There was laughter behind him, a lot of it from Slytherin. "What is this? What is this? What... is... *this*?"

Could you hurry up with this? Dantanian thought irritably, the sound of the Hat and his thoughts ringing loud in the memory of the Sorting. *I don't want to be a Hat Stall.*

The Hat sounded almost flummoxed, though. "Daniel Shaw, from Barton-under-Needwood. Or Dantanian Noir, from Paris. One outward name, and one inward. What is even the name you should be truly called?"

My name is Dantanian Noir, Dantanian thought quickly. *My mother's name was Astarte Noir-*

The Hat cut off his usual recitation. "All of that is clear. What is not clear is your true name. Is it one? Both, or neither?"

I don't like riddles, Dantanian thought, and the Hat let out a laugh.

"Then you would not enjoy Ravenclaw," it said with audible relish, as if there was some slight sadism in the thing.

No, I didn't mean that, Dantanian thought frantically. *I want to be in Ravenclaw. My grandmother was a Ravenclaw. My mother would have been, if she had gone here. My mother and grandmother were cleverer than any student in this hall. Probably than any professor. And I'm of their blood. If I want to be in Ravenclaw, you should put me in Ravenclaw.*

"Such arrogance..." mused the Hat. "Such self-importance. Is that the heroism of a Gryffindor? Or the ambition of a Slytherin?"

Anything but Slytherin. Dantanian was still issuing the Hat orders. *House Black always goes in Slytherin. I can't go there.* He glanced reflexively back towards the headmaster, whose form was a bit more distant, but still looming. *And I don't want to be in a house with that pretty little brat and his cronies.*

"You may fit in Slytherin," the Hat went on, "Or you may not. You may fit in Ravenclaw, and you may not."

Let me guess, Dantanian thought savagely. *It's the same for Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Is there any other hats available for this task, you seem too* befuddled *to be up to standard-*

"You may fit anywhere, and you may fit nowhere," the Hat singsonged. "You might be fearless like a Gryffindor. But you might be too cruel to ever belong in that house. You might be brilliant and inventive like a Ravenclaw. But you might let your wisdom be overshadowed by revenge. You might be loyal like a Hufflepuff to the memory of your mother. But you might betray even her someday too-"

I wouldn't! Dantanian yelled in his head. *Never, not that- wait, though, I don't want to be a Hufflepuff- better than Slytherin, I guess-*

"You *will* be ruthless as any Slytherin ever born," the Hat said with more surety. "And you wish to be the lord of a great house and great castle-"

All I want is my birthright.

"But still, your mind is interesting," the Hat concluded. "So different than any other I have touched. Even if it is a mind that may soon fall apart." Dantanian closed his eyes hopefully, thinking *Not Slytherin, Not Slytherin, Not Slytherin,* and the Hat shouted out,

"RAVENCLAW!"

Astarte Noir, Part Two

Chapter Notes

> Hey all! As I warned, chapters will be coming out later in the day for this book. Sorry I can't give an exact time, though they should usually be out before midnight, two days after the last chapter. This time, it will be three days. Sorry! :)
>
> Anyway, thanks for reading, and please enjoy Astarte Noir, Part 2 of 3!
>
> PS- is AO3 acting up for anyone else? It's been very recalcitrant today :(
>
> Playlist

"Who are you, Daniel Shaw?"

The world changed from the Hogwarts Great Hall to one of its many hallways. This one looked much like the one outside Charms class, which Dorian Malfoy's complaints would soon confirm. Dorian had Dantanian stopped outside the door, holding up the flow of pupils like no one had anything better to do than listen. The other first-years were gathering around with such interest, he was probably right.

Dantanian waited until Dorian elaborated. "Who are you, 'Daniel'? Because you're not a Muggleborn. That much is for sure."

"Why do you say that?" Dantanian asked, inspecting his fingernails. A long curl of dark hair escaped its tie and fell across his face. He pushed it away absently, and Dorian watched him before answering.

"Because you've done that charm before," Dorian said haughtily. "And you are being a *shameless* liar, showing us all up, pretending you hadn't- no one could learn Incendio so powerfully without previous magical practice. For more than just a summer!"

Dorian's friends in the crowd nodded and made agreeing noises, enthusiastic in their resentment. It sounded as though Dantanian must have been immoderate in class, demonstrating his command over fire. It must have rubbed many wizards of more illustrious bloodlines wrong, to be 'shown up', as Dorian had at least had the grace to openly put it, by a mere quiet 'Muggleborn'. For his part, Dantanian did not seem inclined to explain that actually, in this case, Incendio as a charm might even be superfluous for him, as a blood-born pyromancer.

"It's in other classes too," Dorian proclaimed, as if this incident was just a last straw. "You have experience. It's obvious. And you don't *act* like a Muggleborn."

"What does a Muggleborn act like?"

Dorian didn't seem to have a good answer, but he acted like he did. "Naive, and curious. Impressed. They've never seen anything as glorious as Hogwarts. You just spend all your time in the library looking at books by yourself! Being all mysterious, like you're too good to be anyone's friend! You're *weird*!"

Despite the crowd of children who seemed in agreement, like some kind of high-pitched, low-stakes proto-lynch mob, Dantanian could not have seemed less intimidated. "Thank you," he said, and brushed past Dorian with a curious half-smile.

From Charms to Potions class, with the Slytherin and Ravenclaw first-years again together. The curriculum here seemed similarly unaltered from what it was a century later. Just as all wizards needed to know how to make fire, it appeared they all needed to make Herbicide Potion too, and were nearly done. Back then, even with first years, it looked like everyone brewed alone. Everyone was settled in before their cauldrons, with Lamia Periander assisting Dantanian quietly in the addition of Horklump juice to the brewed mixture, application of heat and Flobberworm mucus, and stirring and final wand-wave to complete the potion.

"Thank you," Dantanian said, and she smiled before turning to whisper with one of the Ravenclaw girls who had also completed her potion. Clearly a popular girl, Lamia, despite that remarkable name. Perhaps Lamia was more a common piece of Muggle than wizarding mythology, although the two often overlapped.

Dantanian had his own mission. With his potion successful, the lime-electric green shade quite apparent, his attention turned covertly towards the Slytherins, though through a thicket of hair, purposefully fallen to shield his face this time. He watched Dorian keenly as he joked and laughed with Slytherins around hanging on his every word, until at last he got around to adding his Horklump juice and turning the burner on. It was only meant to be medium heat. In some timeline or another, Neville Longbottom had made the mistake of more heat than that for too long, and melted his cauldron and anything on the floor within a fifteen-meter radius. Dorian watched his flame more cautiously, adjusting it to what looked the right temperature. And then, perhaps predictably, Dantanian merely blinked behind his lovely long ringlets of dark hair, and the flame swelled at once to twice its size, and went from orange to white-blue hot.

"What- help! Help help!" Dorian cried out comically, and leaped up onto his chair, doing nothing to try and control his fire. Not that it would have likely worked, with a stronger force than his hand on the dial taking it in hand now. But he might have made the attempt, rather than abandon his cauldron to melt more spectacularly than any of Neville's ever had. It sent Slytherins all about shrieking and fleeing with green poison turning thick and curdled dark at their feet, spraying out to encase nearly all of a paralyzed Herbert Burke in a quick-cooling shell of charcoal-colored goop. Most maddeningly for Burke, perhaps, was that when the Slytherin girls used their gloves to try and scrape off the shell and free him, the re-unveiling of his tie proved it had turned from green to *red.*

Dantanian did not gloat or crow over his victory. He just followed Periander and the other Ravenclaws out in an orderly fashion, as if the accident had nothing more to do with him than the rest of them. That facade of uninvolvement must have been broken quickly, though, and by Dantanian himself, to judge by the next memory the trail of them swirled into being.

Still in the murk and swimming lake-light of the dungeons, Dorian exited from Severus's old office- no, the current Potions professor's office, the disquietingly-named Abernathy Nott per the old-fashioned nameplate on the door. Dorian was sulking mightily as he stalked out, though a brief glimpse of a pale and rather sweaty Professor Nott showed that the rebuke had not been as one-sided as one might suppose. Then Dorian caught sight of someone waiting for him, right around the corner towards the stairs, but still in a length of dungeon labyrinth that placed him almost entirely in stone and shadow.

"Hello, Malfoy," Dantanian said, and gave again that uncanny half-smile.

Dorian took a step back reflexively, then steeled himself, squaring his shoulders and raising his jaw haughtily in a manner that could have been more convincing. "Thanks to you, I've lost thirty whole points for Slytherin! I know it was you!"

Dantanian shrugged elegantly. "You were praising my ability with fire charms. I gave you a bonus demonstration. You're welcome."

"What do you want, Mudblood?"

Dantanian looked at him thoughtfully. "That's the first time I've heard you use that term. Not like the other Slytherins, they say it all the time. But from you, is that slur reserved just for me?"

"And that's the most consecutive sentences I've ever heard *you* speak," Dorian retorted. "No, as a matter of fact, I have no issue with the sentiment behind the term, only the sound of it. I prefer to speak more elegantly, and both *mud* and *blood* are objects of a coarseness I prefer to keep out of my life *and* verbiage." The corner of Dantanian's lip twitched slightly, before he seemed to remember he was there to be menacing. "I don't have any *quarrel* with Muggleborns, either. I don't wish any quarrel with anyone, I have far more to lose than anyone else would with-"

"That's certainly true," Dantanian said quietly, and his thick-lashed dark eyes looked suddenly more like Bellatrix Lestrange's in their stare.

"Everyone is perfectly fine with me," Dorian proclaimed, stretching out his arm magnanimously like an emperor granting pardons, "To live their lives, as long as they are honest about their place in the world, and show the proper respect to their betters. Which is where I have found you, *Daniel*, to be sorely lacking- *Salazar*!"

Dorian's shriek echoed through the narrow hallway, echo prolonged and eerie in the sudden darkness that had prompted his cry. There were no windows or grates in this well-chosen section, the blue filtering of light from the lake only a distant thing, which meant that it was

near-pitch blackness when, all as one, every torch along the walls went out. "Daniel?" Dorian gasped shakily, and then there was the sound of fingers snapping. The hall was so silent, that echoed too.

Snap. Dantanian's young face came back into focus, lit by his fingers. From them grew a lazy spiral of blue fire, almost more like mist, though it whirled tightly into a white-hot coil to hover above his palm, as if just to show it could, before dissipating to a more diffused brightness. The aristocratic features of House Black were thrown into sharp relief behind the large doll-like eyes and lips, and the softness of childhood on Dantanian's Patronus-colored face, pale as if he had cast out all the blood in himself along with the fire on his hand. The effect was only slightly ruined, by him having to twist his small neck to get his hair out of his face again.

Dorian stared breathless as Dantanian stepped once, twice forward. "Do you have something to say to me, Malfoy?" Dorian was speechless, with Dantanian's face tilted up towards his no longer impassive but contemptuous. "Now would be the time. Not in front of the others, not to make some scene to make yourself look important. If you ever find me *interesting* again, say what you have to say *alone*." He spoke with an authority only possible from practice. Perhaps he had executed a scene or two like this before, with one or two of the Muggle children whom his grandparents had said bullied him. Dantanian *had* said, *They don't do that anymore.*

Dorian seemed unable to form words, even as Dantanian waited. His silver-blue eyes were saucers on his cute young face, lips fallen half-parted, every feature written with astonishment. If not, perhaps, the kind of repulsed, bone-chilled terror that Dantanian must have intended. "You will draw no further attention to me in that manner," Dantanian finally went on, "Because I am not, in fact, interesting." Dorian's eyes registered their confusion, but only slightly, behind mesmerized fascination. "I am the least interesting student at Hogwarts, and you will *not* raise any suspicion otherwise. Understood?"

Dorian nodded. Dantanian bared his teeth, shark-white in the unnatural light. A large pearl-like bead of sweat ran down over Dorian's face from the proximity of fire, tracing down his cheek like a teardrop.

"Good. Because I'm normal. Maybe I'm shy, but I'm just normal and that's it," Dantanian said while letting the fire wave out in tendrils like fingers, one threatening to caress Dorian's face. "If you try and say otherwise, ever again, you'd be- the expression is *playing with fire*."

Dantanian snapped his fingers, and the light flew from his fingers, splintering, and reentered each of the ten torches along the hall, neatly falling into place and turning a common orange. Dorian covered his mouth to hold back another scream, and Dantanian looked very pleased with himself. "I look forward," Dantanian said more conversationally, "To us never speaking to one another again," and walked away.

Dorian would not have been Draco's ancestor, if he had not been interested in playing with fire.

30 April 1883 read the top of the newspaper on the table: still first-year. Dorian had a first-year's glee running up to Ravenclaw's table in the Great Hall and interrupting Dantanian's reading. Dantanian gave Dorian an unsurprised glare at this intrusion, no doubt intended to be baleful and menacing, but without firelight, it came off more like adorable pettishness. Dorian was unafraid to plop himself beside Dantanian and announce, "Your friend's an abomination!"

Dantanian turned to look at him, seeming more alarmed at the first part of the sentence. "I don't have any friends."

"Lamia Periander," Dorian said eagerly. "Burke's had a letter from his cousin at Beauxbatons- you know, the one in first year there with my fiancé- and after he mentioned the smartest girl in their year is a pureblood called Periander, Vivienne Burke said everyone knows the name Periander at Beauxbatons! Did you know the Perianders are exiles? That they've just come to Britain from France, and they can't go back there or they'll be *killed*?"

Dantanian did a poor job repressing his curiosity this time. "I know the Perianders' business. They've been doing it for generations. It's why Lamia works so hard at her studies, so she can follow in her father's footsteps. They're magical assessors and keep a menagerie. Her father does work for families in the Sacred Twenty-Eight like yours, so I had thought you wouldn't find them as objectionable as, say, a Mudblood like myself-"

"A menagerie is right," Dorian cooed smugly. "You think you know everything about your friend, don't you?" He ignored Dantanian's murmur of *Not my friend.* "But I know something you don't know!"

Dantanian rolled his eyes, another startlingly young expression on that world-worn face. "Of course. That's what you're here to show off and gloat about? Why are you talking to me anyway?"

The Great Hall was nearly deserted, likely a fair bit before supper, but Dorian was indeed not showing the circumspection one might expect, as the heir to House Malfoy publicly speaking to a Muggleborn in those days. "Because I know something you don't know!" he singsonged again, more lilting and smug. "I know that Lamia is going to turn into a *beast*!"

"Huh," Dantanian said, and returned to his newspaper. At Dorian's crushed look of disappointment, he rolled his eyes again. "What, am I expected to be shocked? It's right there in her name. A snake if it's on the nose. Can't think anyone was trying to be subtle-"

"What do you mean, her name?" Dorian asked.

Dantanian actually looked away, turning his neck around, to keep Dorian from seeing him bite his lip to hold back a smile, and actually approach a real smile.

"British pureblood education truly is superior to any all the world over," Dantanian drawled.

Dorian scrunched up his face. "Oh, so she told you, then? It's good if you're fine with it, because no one else will talk to her now. She's probably going to be a Maledictus, just like

her grandmother, and slowly turn into some magical creature until she can't ever be human again-"

A soft noise came from lower down the table, where fellow Ravenclaw Lamia had been working on an essay by herself, cloak up and head down. It fell as she gathered her books and hastily walked away, exposing a face so swollen with tears it was nearly purple. Dantanian winced, then turned to give Dorian a truly contemptuous look. "I would have assumed you would have checked the immediate radius," he said icily, "Before repeating the news that's doubly ruined a girl's life, within a three-meter range of the girl herself."

"I didn't see her," Dorian called, looking genuinely guilty, and pouted down at Dantanian's discarded newspaper, as Dantanian got up and swiftly left Ravenclaw table too.

Unexpectedly, he actually followed Lamia. She stopped walking only when they were almost back to Ravenclaw, and on the last spiral staircase that led to the eagle knocker. "What do you want, Daniel?" she hissed, voice venomous but her arms wrapped around herself protectively.

Dantanian considered. "Would you mind if we spoke a bit? Alone?"

She looked wary, but less wary than she did of the prospect of actually going into the Ravenclaw common room. She followed him to the trophy room, and threw off her hood completely with miserable frustration as they settled down on the floor. Dantanian leaned against the wall, then took off her book-laden bag from her shoulder and put it aside, so the weight was no longer on her. "Lamia," Dantanian said bluntly, "What's a Maledictus?"

Her explanation was delivered at first distrustfully, stilting and cold, but she was fighting back tears by the time she admitted that it was neither certain nor uncertain whether she would end her life as human or animal, or even which kind of animal. "Reptilian, though, surely," Dantanian said, and then brightened. "Lamia, I've always thought dragons were so beautiful. Might you become a dragon?"

Lamia looked confused. "Why would you think- oh, the legend, behind my name? I hate that, it's so stupid, but it's a family name... oh, Merlin, is that why you're here, Daniel? Because you want me to turn into a dragon for you?"

Dantanian considered. "No," he said. "Well, not entirely." Lamia laughed at that, tears escaping her eyes as she huffed out a bit of amusement despite herself. "I'm curious. Your family sounds interesting. Is the curse just in your blood? And the menagerie- is it entirely of Maledictus-is-ay- I don't know the plural. Is it all your kin?"

Lamia looked more shocked, then, at his fearless inquiry, thin lips twisting up like his did, even as there were salty teardrops settling between them. "We say it's all real non-magical creatures, but that's not true. I don't know how much of the menagerie is and isn't... well, and Father's been speaking of selling the menagerie anyway..." The implications of selling their kin as magical creatures didn't seem to have occurred to her. "But the curse- I don't know. It isn't really a curse. Or if it is, it's self-inflicted."

She had the rare pleasure then of actually surprising Dantanian. "The magical assessment we do," Lamia said, wiping her eyes, "Is complex, organic. Old magic, blood-bound. *Lunar* magic, and flesh magic. The form we're known for requires a deep partnership with a Maledictus. And so... I know there were experiments, lots of unnatural kinds. They got our family driven out of more than just France. Especially if Grandfather experimented on the wrong person." She looked shakily gratified by Dantanian's snort of laughter. "But as long as I can remember, I've known that our family line is almost only carried on by its men. Because- because a Periander woman almost always becomes a Maledictus in the end. It's our role. Of service."

Dantanian tilted his head, nothing pitying in his gaze. "I don't know you. But you don't seem the type to enjoy that. 'Serving'."

"No," Lamia said, hands clenching to fists on her knees. "And I'm my father's only child. He can't conceive another, the doctors have tried everything. Which means that I'm the heir, and there's only cousins to carry on- our family's never deviated from the main bloodline, though, there's all these weird traditions- and someone needs to be the head of House Periander. And that person works as the assessor. To ensure we're welcome in whatever new country we land in. I want to be an assessor, like my father was. A powerful witch, who stays a powerful witch. He did a ritual when I was born, which should prevent me ever transforming. When my father dies, I'll take over for him, and work with my grandmother. She's an Augurey."

"Are you going to do dark and illegal experiments too? Like the rest of your family's done?"

"Well. If the occasion arises..."

"Because," Dantanian said calmly, "If you will, then I would very much like for you and I to be friends."

They were together again in the next memory, sitting down together at a nearly-full Ravenclaw table. Most of the children were milling around excitedly, catching up on their summers apart and running around, while a new crop of first-years waited up front nervously for another Sorting. But a second-year Dantanian and Lamia sat at the most distance available from any other students, and the students in turn gave them a wide berth, though all their stares of hostility seemed towards Lamia. Dantanian seemed unnoticed, beside a girl they clearly seemed to regard as a dangerous freak by now. That dangerous freak was currently doing the nefarious dark work of giving her friend a present, a large parcel of old newspapers.

"It took a while to get hold of all of them," Lamia complained, paging through to show Dantanian every date of the Prophet present between a range of months, mainly the start to the end of 1877 and 1878. "Wizards really are terrible at keeping records. Are you sure you won't tell me why you wanted them? We would have been seven back then..."

Dantanian smirked. "Do you want to tell *me* why you wanted a copy of your eponymous poem by some Muggle?" She pocketed the copy he handed her of *The Poetry of John Keats*. "Want to know exactly how the whole world sees your kind, is that it?"

"Shut up, weirdo," Lamia said, and Dantanian smiled.

"You shut up, freak," he said with equal fondness.

"Ha!" a voice above them proclaimed. "I knew it!"

Dorian Malfoy was, predictably, the voice. Lamia looked up at him with uncomplicated irritation at the interruption, while Dantanian's stare seemed to size Dorian up more thoroughly. "This one," Dantanian said to Lamia, as if Dorian wasn't there. "How has he gotten even taller? It's monstrous. Well, he'll likely stop growing by the end of, say, third year-"

"I," Dorian interrupted, with an air of magnificence, "Have finally figured out your secret."

Lamia leaned forward, putting her chin on her hands. "Go on, then. What's his secret?"

If Dorian had been older, or perhaps less rushed by the impending Sorting, he might have noticed the way Dantanian stiffened and looked at Lamia, in real fear that Dorian somehow had something on him. But Dorian was too busy reaching into his bag and producing a Periander family tree. "Here!" Dorian said triumphantly, unfolding a very worn and dog-eared parchment, and pointed to one of Lamia's cousins, on her uncle's side. The name *Dionysus Periander*, above the same birth year as Lamia, had been circled several times, then crossed out. Beneath it to replace it was written in excited red block letters, *"Daniel Shaw", "Muggleborn"*.

This, naturally, did not provoke the reaction that Dorian had been hoping for. "You have a cousin," Dantanian said incredulously, "Called *Dionysus*?" Lamia wilted, reddening enough to cover her face, and Dantanian began to laugh, drawing the attention enough of those around them to make Dorian look even more sullen. "Are you *serious*? Lamia is one thing, but *Dionysus*? Are you *kidding*? Do your cousins own a brewery? A brothel? A *sewage management facility*?"

"Excuse me," Dorian said poutily, "If you notice, I've uncovered your secret, Dionysus. I know your true identity. It explains why you weren't very close to her, until she was in trouble and ostracized, and then you stopped keeping your distance-"

"Or he's just a decent person," Lamia said. "And reached out and befriended someone in need when they were at their lowest-"

"You're secret cousins!" Dorian announced, throwing his arms out majestically.

Dantanian, who seemed to feel well within his rights to laugh at both of them, slid down on the bench, clutching his stomach. "Stop it," he cackled, "I think I'm going to die. Or urinate on myself!"

Dorian's silvery eyes flashed. "If you don't admit your secret identity," he threatened grandly, "I'll tell all of Hogwarts-"

Dantanian considered. "Alright, two questions, and then we really should get settled before the Sorting. One, Dorian, what proof do you believe you have?"

Dorian shifted uncomfortably. "He was born your year! It makes sense! And your, er, names are similar-"

"Not that I wouldn't love that," Dantanian sighed, grabbing at his stomach to hold back more rounds of laughter, "Being called *Dionysus.* But Dionysus sounds more like *Dorian* than *Daniel*." Dantanian ran his eyes over Dorian's frame with a coolly calculated suggestiveness, before cracking up and ruining his dig at Dorian. "It certainly would- heh- suit you more! And two, Lamia! *Why* did you not tell me you had a cousin called *Dionysus*? Should I be sending *grapes* to France? Like Muggles writing to Father Christmas, and leaving him biscuits... Offerings? Perhaps nude *sketches* of myself? Does he prefer a front or back view? Can I call him Bacchus if I'm nasty?"

"Everyone back to your seats," Lamia sighed, but at least there was far more life and far less shame to her broad face than there had been the past April. "And Malfoy, if you want to make any more of your guesses about Daniel's supposed secret, you get your next one at the Entrance Feast *next* year. I don't think Daniel's *bladder* could survive any more before then."

"Neil Palmer," Dantanian said, voice in something of a daze. He picked up the newspaper in its carefully laid preserving plastic, ensured he had dislodged none of the plastic, and then took it along with himself to the furthermost corner of the library. Lamia followed out of curiosity, settling beside him where he sat at the very dregs of the History of Magic section, under tomes about fourteenth-century wizarding skirmishes in Anatolia. "Neil Palmer," he repeated, and let Lamia take the paper from him. She gave him a tense look and cast a dictation charm.

"We'll copy this down in your notebook like everything else," Lamia said, "Though it would help if you ever would just tell me *what* you're researching-"

"Research is over," Dantanian said blankly, staring down at his hands. His fingernails were digging into his palms, in half-made fists. "I've found what I needed. If it's true. All I need."

"Ministry Junior Liaison to France Sentenced to Life in Azkaban," Lamia read, and her hovering quill repeated the words in writing on the open page of Dantanian's notebook. There was no way to make it draw the picture, though, of the consummately ordinary-looking wizard who had been contentiously convicted- contentiously only because the extradition laws between wizarding Britain and France were still hazy. Ironically, it might well have become the job of one Mr. Neil Palmer to help resolve such contentions, had he not been the culprit. As it was, the story was buried more than a few pages deep in the paper, all facts and little editorializing.

"Mr. Neil Palmer, 31, pleaded guilty on 13 April 1878, for crimes committed 14 February of the same year in his city of assignment, Paris, France. Mr. Palmer was arrested in London, England at the British Ministry of Magic, where he turned himself in on the morning of 15 February for the murder of French citizen Astarte Noir, 31, and her son, Dantanian Noir, age

unknown. Upon his confession, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement dispatched Aurors in congruence with French authorities to investigate Mr. Palmer's claims. The mutilated and dismembered bodies of Miss Noir and her son had already been discovered by Muggle authorities. A joint task-force of British and French wizards arrived in her flat and took over the case..."

"Why did you stop?" Dantanian said, eyes coming to life with a feverish glow. "What does it say? Who is Palmer? Why did they kill her? Are they sure it was him?"

"No, it's just..." Lamia flinched, not seeming to want to speak aloud the next paragraph. Dantanian took over for her.

"I would have thought," Dantanian whispered with a show of patently false bravado, "That a Periander would be made of sterner stuff." He spoke louder to take over dictation.

"Aurors discovered that the body of Miss Noir had also suffered aggravated assault of a sexual nature. Upon confrontation, Mr. Palmer confessed to the further charge of assault, as well as an assault of the same nature in September 1877. Mr. Palmer had been prosecuted in Muggle French court on invasion of privacy charges against a Miss Eloise Bourbeau. From the Muggle court, Mr. Palmer received only a fine and warning. Mr. Palmer confessed of his own volition that he had assaulted Miss Bourbeau, and used the Obliviation charm to erase the memory of the incident from the victim."

"Why are we *reading* this? It's terrible. And what does it have to do with-"

"Mr. Palmer claims to have only intended to commit a similar assault against Miss Noir. In the course of his invasion of her Montmartre flat and painting studio, Mr. Palmer surprised Miss Noir in bed and took her down the stairs without her wand. Upon his attempt to assault her, she physically fought him despite his possession of both of their wands. She wounded his face with her fingernails, leaving his face scarred with dramatic scratch marks. Mr. Palmer claims that Miss Noir was afraid for the safety of her sleeping son, and would not submit to his commands without- without assurances he could not give of her son's safety from him-"

"Daniel? Daniel, are you alright?" Lamia asked, alarmed, and shook Daniel's shoulder when he didn't answer. He was not crying, as the wretched hitch in his voice had suggested he might. Instead, his eyes had gone from the paper, looking nowhere in particular, unless his eyes could see out of Hogwarts and over the ocean.

"Azkaban. He's in Azkaban."

A blink of an eye and months passed, second-years turned to third-years on the cusp of puberty. Dorian Malfoy was there, again grown taller, waiting for them to stop whispering and give him attention. Lamia was still plain-faced and slump-shouldered, her dark hair more of a mess than last year, though she seemed happier altogether. The most notable was Dantanian, whom a year had made look noticeably more like his mother. Perhaps that why he was looking up towards the high table, and an unchanged Headmaster Black, with renewed wariness, before he deigned to acknowledge the heir to House Malfoy.

Eventually, Dorian got his attention, if only with what a summer of thought had delivered him. "You're not really thirteen," he said breathlessly, and Lamia looked tempted to go off somewhere else.

Dantanian frowned. "I'll be fourteen in December, if that's what you mean. I have a rather early birthday. Is that my grand secret? I'm still thirteen now."

"No!" Dorian proclaimed, somehow with full confidence in his answer. "You're not actually young at all! You're an observer- a secret observer, from, er, the Ministry or something- pretending to be young, to spy upon- *the youth*!"

"The long con?" Dantanian said skeptically. "What, am I just swimming in Polyjuice? Or has the Department of Mysteries developed some truly eye-popping experiments in secret? How does that work in that pretty little head, Dorian? Or is it just air up there," he teased, leaning forward with more engagement than the past year. Dorian made an outraged face, and Dantanian tossed his neck back and scoffed elegantly at him. "That doesn't even have to do with whether I'm Muggleborn anymore, you know. Why do you think there's some secret in the first place if-"

"I," Dorian said haughtily, "Am a clever and learned young man of the world. Enough to know that you..." He brandished his finger. "Are different! Strange! Exceptional! Amongst our year, amongst all the students at Hogwarts, there is something that sets you apart from all of them as- as-"

Dantanian tossed his long curls with his hand then, lowering his eyelashes to give Dorian a more mocking stare. "More attractive?"

"Yes!" Dorian exclaimed, then seemed to realize what he'd agreed to. "Or- no. Wait! I didn't mean-"

Dantanian toyed with his hair with a childish coquettishness. "If you're here to tell me how special and exceptional I am and all that, Malfoy, by all means, but for the sake of your *reputation*, a more prudent *young man of the world* might declare his feelings in a *slightly* less public locale-"

Dantanian watched Dorian storm off in a flushed huff. He found Lamia had indeed grown bored and wandered off to pepper an annoyed-looking Professor Nott with questions. He smiled brightly, watching her, then looked down and smiled more slightly, just to himself, a secret smile.

"You're a time traveler!" blurted Dorian, and the sudden yelp made Dantanian and Lamia start, just as the words used might make any observer of the memories take pause.

"Wait, we're still doing that game?" Lamia groaned, and looked around the Ravenclaw table. Either none of their friends were there, or the two outcasts were still yet to make any more, even by fourth year. "Give up already, Malfoy, the only extraordinary things about Daniel are his ego and his hair."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Dantanian said placidly, beginning a leisurely, unhurried inspection of fourth-year Dorian after another summer. Dorian's growth had indeed, as predicted, begun to slow some already. What was remarkable was his features, which had resolved from pointy and awkward, to high cheekbones and charisma, with skin clear as an oil painting, years and years before that would happen for a certain jealous descendant- if it ever would that dramatically. Dorian looked on the path to grow unfairly handsome enough, he might be fit to inspire the Muggle novel the name Dorian was now most famed for.

"This is not a game." Dorian glowered as Lamia. "And I don't hear a denial there. I think I've got it, haven't I! You gave yourself away last year, mentioning the Department of Mysteries, and experiments!"

Lamia and Dantanian were much like in third-year, only taller and narrower, with Dantanian having contrived to develop a much longer neck in the interim. He seemed intent on showing off that pale swan neck as much as possible, with his hair bound for the first time, more sensibly, in a single long braid down his back. The thick curls seemed liable to rebel and escape it at any moment, and there were always smaller wisps framing his face, but he seemed to have settled on a way to keep his hair out of the way as much as possible. Even if it was one his mother never seemed to have used.

"Shouldn't you be spending your summers wooing your first cousin," Dantanian commented mildly, "Rather than speculating about a perfectly ordinary, innocuous Muggleborn, of no real import to-"

"Anne and I," Dorian said loftily, "Have been engaged since before we were *conceived.* The custom is for us not to meet until the wedding-"

"What, to avoid the air of incest about it?" Lamia asked dubiously.

Dantanian snickered. "I hate to say it, but it seems that ship's probably already sailed-"

"*I*," Dorian seethed, "Am questioning *you*, not the other way-"

"Not a time traveler," Dantanian said nonchalantly, "And I'll expect a guess for next year better than *that.*"

"Don't encourage him," Lamia muttered, but Dantanian leaned forward, hair falling near Dorian's face.

"I'll tell you, you know," Dantanian said with faux-friendliness. "If you ever guess the truth. I'll be honest, and say you've got it right. But you never will."

Dorian indeed looked encouraged. "Oh, you're admitting there *is* a secret-"

"Or," Dantanian countered, "The secret could be that there is no secret. But you'd have to use up one of your years to guess that."

It was perhaps a not altogether good thing, how much time could pass with places remaining the same. There was the Convent Coven of Ichamore, ghosts unchanged as ghosts tended to be, with their music unchanged as well, save perhaps for a bit more of a somber tinge to it. If Disney movies had existed back then, the coven would certainly not have been playing any songs from them. Instead, the enchanted ever-floating mist of snow over the ballroom palpitated and dispersed to a fugue, taking Dantanian's attention from Lamia's humorless father Hostilian Periander, and back to the silver cellos of the coven, where he stared until Hostilian was swept away to network with far more important guests than his daughter and her scandalously Muggleborn companion.

"You shouldn't have brought me," Dantanian sighed, fiddling with his tenuously-constructed fishtail braid. Lamia looked more comfortable in this rarefied pureblood air, with her fine layered opal-white robes, swan queen make-up and feather jewelry, and heavy crystal-laden make-up showing her if still not pretty, at least presentable. Dantanian did not meet that standard, to judge by the disjunction between his unadorned black robes and the majesty of the gala, with even the ice sculptures of Sphinxes seeming to lose their vacant self-importance enough to gape at his plainness. His face itself might have been a gem in some eyes, and the simplicity of his garb making his naturally striking features stand out all the more in this sea of opulence. But it merely made him a grubby pauper, like Cinderella without a fairy godmother, at Malfoy Manor.

"You should have dressed up," Lamia countered. "I don't want to be here either," she mumbled, though she seemed to enjoy the lychee nectar she was gulping enough to somewhat belie that. "I just have to be for my father. So our family looks proper."

"I know," Dantanian groaned, looking over towards Hostilian Periander, who resembled not so much Pammaque Periander as a purple wig dragging about Amycus Carrow. He managed to keep his dissatisfaction with his friend's father off his face, but it was a transparent struggle. "I know the necessity of ingratiation, with the movers and shakers of this... *narrow* world. And I wasn't about to let you go to something like this alone." Lamia didn't argue that assertion. They both seemed well-aware he was the only date she could ever have gotten. "I'm sorry I couldn't afford anything better to wear. You know my grandparents never-"

"I would have gotten you something, if you'd only asked," Lamia grumbled. They fell into a comfortable mode of grousing at each other, until she elbowed him and they both fell silent. The Malfoys had climbed up into view of everyone there, on a kind of stage, glittering with so much crystal or diamond or whatever expensive thing could be made to look like ice, they fit the name of Heart of Winter. From a distance, both Selene and her husband John looked generically beautiful, as did her little brother Nicholas and his wife Amelie. The sight was only shaded over by the white-clad, looming figure of the grandfather, Abraxas. The gala quieted in anticipation, but the four adults only stood there waiting.

"Which ones are his parents?" Dantanian whispered, staring up at the two couples. "The one with the dark-haired man, the Potter, right... I still don't get how that works, I know she's older than her brother, but succession is through the male line regardless- and her and Dorian's name should be Potter too-"

"Bastards, that's what," Lamia whispered, with not a hint of awareness about Dantanian's true identity. "Nicholas is Abraxas's bastard by another woman. A good pureblood woman from the Lovegoods, so they had to acknowledge him and take him in. But the talk is- at least, Father says- that when Abraxas brought Nicholas home, his wife Cordula Flint wouldn't so much as sit in the same room with him. They had a daughter and that would be it. So he engaged Selene to a Potter for a strong alliance- and, well, the Potter money- and he took and they both kept the Malfoy name. And they had a son who everyone could be happy with as the next heir. When Cordula Flint died a few years ago- young- Abraxas abdicated the succession formally to John Potter Malfoy, making him Lord Malfoy, and Dorian formally the heir."

She saw Dantanian's stunned expression. "Didn't know much of that, did you? Funny, what people in these families can get up to. Say this about the Perianders and our curses- you'll never hear about us having any *bastards.*"

Dantanian shrugged arrogantly. "Oh, no, I'm more surprised by your characterization of Dorian as an heir *everyone can be happy with.*"

Lamia covered her mouth not to laugh. "Well, people always seem to love him, though. And he *looks* the part. See?" At his parents' summons, Dorian finally mounted the stage with his family, in opal-blue crepe de chine robes that hung low enough at his throat to show off the most staggering diamond choker any of them would likely see in all their lives, a shock of brilliance even near the back of the room, diamonds at his ears and wrists and the small coronet on his head: something between true royalty, and a Patronus of an Antipodean Opaleye.

Dantanian moved forward with Lamia, closer to the stage to see the Malfoys. He stared at Dorian with frightening intensity, from the small crown of braids on his threaded with real silver, to the tight cut of an obi-like bright crimson sash that pulled his robes taut at his waist, showing off the shape of his exquisite frame. It was intent enough that he missed the beginning of the traditional blessing, by the philandering grandfather Abraxas.

"May your magic, your blood, and your loves be as pure as these snows," Selene Malfoy called out over the gathering, and Dantanian's face went whiter than snow. The crowd let out a customary murmur of agreement, as if in a religious ceremony. Lamia listened placidly, not seeming to notice Dantanian's reaction.

"May your magic, your blood, and your loves be as pure as these snows," said John Malfoy.

"May your magic, your blood, and your loves be as pure as these snows," said the pureblooded bastard, Nicholas Malfoy.

"May your magic, your blood, and your loves be as pure as these snows," said his wife Amelie Malfoy.

Dantanian's steps were already taking him out of the crowd, to the back door and out into the night. But he still heard Dorian call out, with that perfectly weighted, charming verbal deftness of his, that made the words sound to ring all the sweeter, "May your magic, your blood, and your loves be as pure as these snows!"

Dantanian walked into the gardens, out from under the terrace gardens and into the further ground ones, past roses of every color, including gold. They were as well well-kept under Selene Malfoy as Narcissa Malfoy, nearly identical, except for the flowers that Dantanian trampled, cutting through swaths of them without bothering to light the end of his wand or call up any flame. He did not seem to have any particular direction, unless it was the hill that hung high above Malfoy Manor overlooking it, or else just *away.*

"Toujours pur," Dantanian was whispering to himself through gritted teeth, in a rage-filled voice like a wound spouting out blood each time. "Toujours pur. *Toujours putain de pur*..."

The sound of Lamia's voice came through from far away, after a time, calling out for him uncertainly. But when she had no response, she must have assumed he had gone elsewhere. The small strip of light from the opened door disappeared, as she presumably went to seek him elsewhere. There was no guilt on Dantanian's face for leaving her alone, though, and perhaps there should not have been, either, to judge by the level of rage there instead. She would probably be safer anywhere else than near Dantanian at the moment. Even though- and one could easily grasp why those words would sting someone with Dantanian's unique circumstances- it was hard to understand how they could possibly have made Dantanian *this* angry. He cast his gaze as savagely over the flowers he trampled as if he was tempted to cast them alight.

Dantanian only stopped when he reached the edge of the Manor gardens, no small feat, and any light or music was but an indistinct flicker, against the completeness of the Christmas night and its waning moon. He sat then in the snow, with no care for his plain robes or the cold, and withdrew his wand. "My name is Dantanian Noir," he recited to himself, instead of a spell. "My mother's name was Astarte Noir. She was a painter. She was perfect..."

Then he broke off the same words he always spoke, lifted his wand, and hissed desperately out of nowhere, "Expecto patronum!"

There were no Dementors there for a Patronus to fight. Even if there had been, the sputtering of only white, uncertain light from the end of an otherwise potent-seeming wand seemed to suggest that the Dementors would have won that fight.

"Damn!" Dantanian gasped, and threw his fizzling wand to the dark ground. "Nothing? Still? *Still*?"

"You missed a lot when you left me at the gala," Lamia told Dantanian, as she came up behind him in the Owlery. Their faces were flushed enough, and their bodies covered in enough layers, it was definitely still cold. And the Owlery at Hogwarts could get very cold indeed, in the heart of winter. "I bet you'd be curious about some of the things I saw and you didn't."

"If you're expecting an apology, don't waste your time," Dantanian said, less cold than just absent, the form of one of the snowy owls taking shape with rapidity, especially once he put down his silver coloring pencil and began to wave his wand over the lines instead. "And if you think I could care less about what that self-important, powerless lot get up to-"

"Dorian Malfoy," Lamia delivered, with audible excitement, "*Lost his virginity.*" She looked undaunted at Dantanian's silent reaction. "He just went off at the end of the party with them! Everyone could see! A girl *and* a boy! Seventh-years! Everyone at Hogwarts knows what happened!"

"In front of his family?" Dantanian asked, without expression or feeling. "With a boy?"

Lamia shrugged. "You know how some of these families in the Sacred Twenty Eight can be. With all the arranged marriages and inbreeding, it's come to be almost expected, fooling around before the marriage- mainly just for the men. As long as it doesn't end in anyone pregnant." Not in more modern experience. Social norms must have shifted since then. "For the real lords, it isn't a problem to be seen with other men like that- *if* you're definitely going to still do your duty, with a pureblood woman, soon enough. So with Dorian already engaged, he can pretty much do as he likes. And it sounds like he *did*."

Neither Dantanian's face nor his body had shifted for a long time. The owl's wings were frozen on the parchment, stopped in the middle of being moved.

"Isn't that crazy?" Lamia laughed. "A threesome with *seventh-years*? I bet before he's sixteen and strictly legal, he's already gone through half of Slytherin-" She stopped as abruptly as Dantanian's sketching had, when she saw Dantanian's full, telling lack of reaction. "Dantanian, you- what's wrong?"

Dantanian looked down fixedly at the sketch. "Nothing. I just think romantic tripe like that is boring. Let him be a child. It's past time I started getting better at drawing wings."

"Expecto patronum!" Lamia called, and the dark Transfiguration courtyard was suddenly lit by the flight of a swooping silver-blue bird. She had to explain to a sullen Dantanian that the creature was an Augurey.

"How long have you been able to cast a corporeal Patronus?" Dantanian whined, sulking on the cobblestone, and she hauled him up by the shoulder. "You make it look so easy..."

"Since I was eleven," Lamia said confidently. "My father started training me in it when I was nine." Dantanian scoffed at her. "I know it's unusual, but he says I'm a prodigy. And you should be able to get it, you'll be *sixteen* soon... we might do them in Defense anyway..."

"I'm not a prodigy," Dantanian said, and stared up at the full moon with a look of deep personal distaste.

"You are," Lamia insisted, "The spells you'd created by the time you were fourteen-"

"Tell that to my grades," Dantanian said dryly.

"If you ever tried at all," Lamia scolded, "Or even paid *attention.* Someday I'm going to stop writing your essays for you. And- if you can invent a spell to brand someone before you turn thirteen-"

"I'd rather just get a Patronus down," Dantanian sighed, "Than be able to invent all the spells in the world."

"Or you could bring me along when you might need one. If you'd just tell me why you want to do one so bad-"

"I have told you." Dantanian eyed his wand as if it must be defective. "The second I can make a corporeal Patronus, I'm leaving Hogwarts forever, and escaping to Azkaban-"

"Be serious." She didn't seem to remember the newspaper article they'd read in the library years ago, or at least to connect the two. After all, the newspaper article had said Dantanian Noir was dead too.

"I am," he said, and closed his eyes. "And I am trying. I think of the happiest memories I have, and clear my mind, and it's only ever these sparks. Why is it different for you?"

"What I remember," Lamia said, crossing over to stand behind him and adjust his stance, "Is when Father showed me his moonstone dagger." Dantanian gave her a slightly interested look, which became more intrigued as he continued. "You know, his ritual dagger. The moonstones are the key. They have to be true moonstones. Hyper-concentrated magic, through the form of moonlight. Compressed and compressed, nights and years of moonlight. He said it was the key to the assessments our family did-" Presumably that meant *apart* from turning their women to magical creature slaves. "And that he was going to start making me my own, too."

"When do you get yours?"

"I don't know," Lamia said, without any doubt. "I'm sure you'll want one yourself someday too."

She had grown to tall and formidable at fifteen, seeming to fill a large amount of the courtyard with her presence. Though her raven hair was cut short, barely reaching past her ears, it suited her more masculine build and features, far less like Keats's Lamia than Dantanian was. She and Dantanian could not have seemed more comfortable if they had been siblings, even as Dantanian 'joked' about abandoning her.

"I don't want anything," Dantanian said stubbornly, "But my own Patronus."

"Well, well, what have we here?" crowed a familiar voice, and moonlight seemed to all cluster around a halo of hair that was moonlight-colored itself, its green snake clasp, and a bronzed P badge. "Students out after curfew! A boy and a girl together, how scandalous. Do we have a violation of Hogwarts moral codes in progress?"

"Yes," Dantanian dead-panned, looking none too alarmed at the arrival of a prefect if it was this one. "You're just in time to save Lamia's virtue, Malfoy." Lamia gave him a dirty look.

"I could give you both detention right here and now," Dorian crowed. "So much detention."

"We're busy, Malfoy, you can stalk me another time," Dantanian said impatiently. "Expecto patronum!" he called, and something more erupted from the end of his wand then. But whatever creature it was, it was too indistinct and twisted upon itself to linger in the air for long.

"I am not stalking you," Dorian said indignantly, toying nervously with a diamond pendant on his neck. "I am a Hogwarts prefect, charged to keep students in their houses after curfew!" Bruises were visible along his throat and collarbones above the silver chain, what looked to be bites from some other boy or girl's amorous attentions. When Dantanian looked up, Dorian seemed to suddenly remember they were there, and tried to pull his collar tighter to hide them. But Dantanian was looking at Lamia instead, with eyes that said, *Get this fool out of my practice courtyard.*

"We're working on the Patronus charm," Lamia admitted. "You wouldn't give us detention for extra Defense work, would you?"

The sounds of Lamia and Dorian bickering seemed to have already turned to white noise for Dantanian, who cast another few poor attempts at a Patronus. Dorian tried to get his attention eventually, but only succeeded by physically waving his hand in Dantanian's face. "Daniel? I said, are you coming to my family's gala again this yuletide? Lamia and her father are invited again-"

"I've been trying to talk him into it," Lamia sighed, "But he had such a terrible time last time, it's pretty difficult."

"Well, that's too bad." Dorian was like the one trying to charm a Prefect into not giving him detention, not the other way around. "Because if you were to agree to come, then I might see my way to forgiving you and your secret cousin your transgressions."

"Why?" Dantanian turned to eye Dorian with more complete contempt than almost anyone could have deserved. "Why would you *want* a Mudblood at your pureblood party? Or someone posing as a Mudblood. Whatever you want to call it. What does it matter to you if I come back to your ugly little hovel?"

"*Malfoy Manor* is not an *ugly little hovel*-"

"You did guess this year," Lamia reminded Dorian, "That he was secretly a ghost-"

"Tell you what. You're working on the Patronus charm? If I can cast a better Patronus than you, you have to come to my party."

"You sound five years old," Dantanian grumbled, but an intrigued Lamia shamed him into accepting. He went first, concentrating with all his might, and made something that almost looked like a face show up in the air. But it dissipated quickly enough.

"Expecto patronum!" Dorian cast, and out of his wand soared a perfect silver stag. It settled on the ground to watch Dantanian, a silent sentinel.

"Better start working on your wardrobe," said a consummately unsympathetic Lamia.

Dantanian could not be said not to have made an effort. The question was whether that was a good thing. He had been virtually incognito in fourth year, remarkable only for shabbiness and the length of his hair. But his time, he proudly escorted Lamia to the top of the stairs.

The announcer called, "Lamia Adora Periander, Heir to House Periander of the Ancient Knot, and her companion, Daniel Shaw."

When they descended, they had every eye on them, and none left them anytime soon.

"They're all staring at you," Lamia whispered as they walked, and Dantanian smirked.

"Your outfit is better than last year too," he reminded her. It was, in fact, very much the same as last year, save for the addition of a few more diamonds. Apparently House Periander was having a good fiscal year.

Dantanian was something else entirely. To begin with, no one seemed to know what to make of such a plain name, attached to the one person, in a party entirely in shades of silver and white, dressed from head to gleaming toe in pitch black.

The way the staring continued even after they finished the descent, though, and caught up with Hostilian seemed to surprise Dantanian. "Why are they so astonished? You were the white swan last year. And I'm your black swan."

"Did you really think you would get much mileage, out of a reference to some Muggle ballet?"

Hostilian eyed him just as dubiously as the rest, but Dantanian was unperturbed. "You'd think it would be a cultural commonality. It's all over mythology, black and white, and swans. There's got to be something about black and white in the story of *Leda* and the swan..."

"You'd better not start on about Leda and the swan," Lamia joked more quietly, "If Malfoy is heading the direction I think he is."

"Do you think I'm afraid," Dantanian said disdainfully, "For people to hear me talk about gods who desire sex with mortal beings, and pursue coitus by mystical transformation into swans..."

He waved the sleeve of his robe in neat derision, a dreamy motion of flaring ebony feathers and fur beneath, even as his words made an approaching Dorian nearly spill his lychee nectar all over his diamonds. Dantanian could not, in truth, had stood out any more at the gala if he had come naked, to say nothing of his light arrogant tenor voice that carried so well.
"Daniel," Dorian greeted. "You look..."

Dantanian's dark hair was, for the first time in memory, straightened completely, and hung in a loose gleaming sheet of darkness all around his face. The front strands were the only ones secured, by a band of glistening black diamonds almost outdone by the tresses beneath them. He had great stones of midnight blue onyx around his throat like some old Egyptian deity,

and long coiling black diamond bracelets up to his shoulders that showed under his robes, translucent where there weren't covered in the feathery fur, real feathers, and scattered black gems that made him a black swan. His dark eyes looked so huge they were unsettling, like some make-up or spell had doubled them in size, and his lashes were so thick they were like wings. He had more black diamonds on than Dorian had white, something like Maleficent showing up to Sleeping Beauty's christening, if the girl had personally invited her. It was hard to believe Dantanian did not have at least as dark purposes as that lady of ill repute.

"Think carefully of how you finish that sentence. If it ends in either a compliment or an insult, you'll regret it."

Dorian looked relieved when he got some imperceptible signal he was needed. "Later!" he blurted, and raced up towards the stage, several pieces of jewelry falling off as he bolted. Dantanian showed no compunction in picking them up and pocketing them. Hard as it was to believe his dark wizard get-up *had* pockets.

Dantanian went outside during the ceremony, but Lamia was relieved when he returned after it, and swept him up to dance with her. Dantanian could not dance whatsoever, but the heavy-footed, stiff-shouldered girl was a well-trained waltzer, and she had him moving serviceably enough soon for Dantanian to cast ill-boding stares in the direction of Dorian, who had danced with a different lovely pureblood boy or girl with every dreary funereal song.

With all of the staring Dantanian did, one would have expected him to be gratified, when Dorian broke off from his latest partner and strode over resolutely towards him. "May I cut in?" Dorian asked Lamia. She stepped aside with a poorly suppressed laugh, while Dorian's head whipped to watch her leave in shocked betrayal.

"Absolutely not," Dantanian said contemptuously. "I'm not fit to dance with a *pureblood*."

Dorian stepped forward anyway, and took Dantanian's shoulders with a surprising lack of fear for the 'black swan'. "You can lead, if you like," Dorian said, charming as the rising moon, and by the time the cellos were striking up their slowest, most dreamy melody of the night, Dantanian was letting Dorian lead him into a dance. A ghost's soprano began a languishing melody in Latin, as if lamenting a tragedy yet to happen.

"You can't dance, can you," Dorian observed within a few beats, "Should have let me lead," and Dantanian responded by taking Dorian by the waist and pulling him closer. Dorian stared at Dantanian with wild pale eyes, and none of the composure or style he'd had dancing with anyone else. Dantanian led Dorian about the floor in stilting steps, a circle of his choice. It was graceful enough, or at least Dantanian's grip was strong enough, that Dorian obeyed.

"Why," Dorian breathed, and had to lick his lips and take a deep breath to get his words out. "Why are you in black?"

"You're the one who made me," Dantanian said, gaze as hawkish as his mother's on the boy so close. "You wore red last year. I liked that."

"Not anymore," Dorian laughed, looking down to the replacement that was now merely opalescent gray. Dantanian's hands slid lower on the fabric, tightening, and Dorian licked his

lips again, seeming almost to shiver. "My parents- they hated that. Last year." When Dantanian spun him, he gasped and clung to Dantanian's chest, their bodies pressed flush together. Dantanian kept him up. "Don't try and spin when you barely know how to walk-"

"Everyone else was spinning," Dantanian said innocently, seeming to enjoy Dorian's stumbling.

"How," Dorian whispered, leaning to breathe the words venomously in Dantanian's ear, "Did you even manage to afford such an outlandish *chicken suit*?"

The jibe didn't seem to land as Dorian hoped. "I stole it," he said nonchalantly. Once again, he had to keep Dorian from stumbling. "Are you this clumsy around everyone, or just me, Malfoy?"

"You *stole* it?" Dorian asked incredulously. "You didn't. *Daniel Shaw*!"

Dantanian just shrugged, eyeing Dorian like he was trying to memorize the glimmering sight of him so close on Christmas. Like something beautiful he thought he would never lay eyes on again.

"I needed practice," Dantanian said softly, "Breaking into places I'm not supposed to go."

There was no memory of how Dantanian got to Azkaban past all the white-cresting waves. A blink of the eye and the memories had him there, climbing up the side of that great grave-like slab braced too low in the sea like it was meant to be swallowed in it. He had on athletic black Muggle clothes and shoes, with a hood over his hair and half his face. There was some sort of magic Dantanian had securing his feet and hands, with no notable athleticism to him and yet a spider-like ease as he climbed. He was going very slowly, in the direction of a cliff-like stretch of flattered stone, bisected by cells extending out right into the place the waves threw themselves up highest, the foam at the top like hungry tongues even at night.

Draco's cell had been in a similar part of Azkaban, although perhaps on the other side. There was no telling. So many of these cells looked the same from the outside, as much unbroken black as Dantanian in the heart of winter. One could only hope the black swan knew exactly where he wanted to fly. The audacity of his own incredible action seemed lost on the swan, perhaps just newly turned sixteen. He had likely said his mantra, before he made the impossible attempt.

This was not a stormy night, and there was no rain to impede Dantanian as he slid, relieved, from a vertical drop to solid ground under his feet. It should not have been such a relief to him, though, as closer to prisoners also meant closer to Dementors. And they would all, invariably, be attracted one by one to the fresh soul that had unexpectedly arrived, so much more light for them to leech out. They would be delighted to, even if it hadn't been their duty. Dantanian had to find his destination- Palmer, one assumed- before the Dementors found him first.

Muggles had a saying, *The house always wins.* If there was a betting market in Azkaban, smart money would always go on the Dementors. A single spectral dark form glided into view from further down the cliff, in the direction Dantanian needed to go. Dantanian withdrew his wand, with no sign of shaking or fear, and flattened himself against the edge of the great fortress, inching along the stone walls as if Dementors operated by sight instead of hunger. He seemed to be waiting to try and cast a Patronus, if he even meant to, until the Dementor was close to him. That was a mistake. Whatever he did, Dementors were like bloodhounds. When one caught the scent of a soul, others would never be long in coming.

More Dementors were looming into place behind the first, as if sliding into being itself, born to put an end to the false existence of one nameless boy. Dantanian waited until there was at least two dozen coming towards him, more swooping in flight around the edges of the fortress, before he made his move. He lifted his wand, hood coming off his face in the sea breeze as he straightened to face so many enemies. There was no fear on his face, even still. He looked more giddy than anything, more happy than he had perhaps looked since his mother walked the earth above ground.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Dantanian yelled, and this time, he succeeded.

It seemed he had found a memory of happiness powerful enough for a Patronus.

Out of his wand erupted the Antipodean Opaleye that Astarte Noir had wielded too, a great and silvery beast in the air that swooped forward in a blinding flash of light to drive the Dementors away. Dantanian ran following it, shoes threatening to slip on the wet stone as he *pursued* the Dementors. They seemed to be in the way of the cell he wanted. Dantanian was laughing to himself lightly, only a bit breathless, and only a bit disbelieving, as his eyes focused. He seemed to catch sight, finally, of the cell he wanted. The runes of the prisoner number were indistinguishable, with the black air of Dementors so near, but the numbers were there in the distance: 462...

"Neil Palmer," Dantanian said, and ran faster.

But there were Dementors coming from his other side, a great wall of shadow that stretched all around in every direction. It closed in on every side, except for the part assailed by the dragon.

The Patronus was too small and too lonely to stand against the whole world of blackness drawing closer and closer. Even as Dantanian tried to draw it close, he seemed to feel that drag upon himself from the Dementors, that once felt was never forgotten, that draining that felt inevitable the moment it caught upon you. He shivered and screamed and the dragon disappeared in the sea of black.

Dantanian held up his wand with shaking hands, only a flickering light remaining as he stood with his back to the wall, hopeless. There was the distant sound of a voice- someone's voice- but it was inaudible against the growing sound in Dantanian's ears of his own voice. A child, crying out *Maman, maman, maman*...

There was no doubt what Dantanian remembered.

Dantanian's eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed before the door of the cell, fingers sliding as they fell along the numbers 462, until they dropped from them.

Dantanian awoke to a voice he had only ever heard from a distance. He had seemed to avoid the man, with presumed success, all through his years at Hogwarts. Until now, laid out in a hospital bed blinking back sleep, after he had done something no headmaster on the planet could possibly ignore from their student.

"I have never heard of anyone breaking out of Azkaban successfully. But nor had I heard of anyone breaking successfully in." The headmaster leaned back in his chair once he was sure he had woken their patient, in a sea of beds so collectively empty, it was like some contagion was feared within. "Until you. But then, I doubt there are many attempts. Tell me, Daniel Shaw. Why would a Muggleborn Hogwarts fifth-year break *into* Azkaban?" *And how,* his troubled eyes seemed to ask, *Could such a person* succeed?

For someone who had so worked to avoid this meeting, Dantanian was not exactly quailing as he sat up. His nightshirt slipped off his shoulder, and he pushed it up before raking his hands through his wild hair. He could not have cast a greater contrast with the man who now held his fate in his hands, whose black robes and short black hair and scowl were all perfectly what one would expect of Phineas Nigellus Black.

"They said," Dantanian began, perhaps putting on more of an appearance of disorientation than he felt, "That one of the human guards found me, and stopped the Dementors. Just in time. That it's a miracle I'm not dead."

"Yes," Phineas said impatiently, as if his student's survival was little matter to him, compared to his student's obedience. "That is a question for the Ministry of Magic. As is the penalty you will incur for your dangerous trespassing, although I am positive that will rest largely, if not solely on my *personal* recommendation. So you would do well not to try my patience. You have been nursed back to health for days, and there will be no further delay-"

Dantanian's head tilted one way and then the other, eyes failing to fully open. "Hmm. I suspect... you plan to expel me."

"You should," Phineas said viciously, "Already have *been* expelled, Mr. Shaw. The only reason you were not was the plea given when we contacted one of your guardians, your grandfather. He claimed you had suffered extraordinary trauma when you were very young, and some Hogwarts professors have taken that as mitigating. They think you are not competent to be held responsible for your own actions."

Dantanian seemed to be holding back sleepy laughter. "Hmm... did you talk to my grandmother too? What did she say?"

"I spoke to her myself. She said, and I quote, 'What can you expect from a devil child?'"

That made Dantanian break into delighted laughter. "She has the virtue of consistency, if nothing else." He pushed his knotted hair off his mouth to laugh harder. His comportment,

lacking fear or remorse, already seemed to have struck Phineas hard, making him lean forward again to inspect him. When Dantanian turned his tired pale face to him, newly retrieved from hell and yet lovely as an expensive doll, Phineas seemed still more disturbed.

"Do you want to be expelled?" Phineas asked furiously.

Dantanian yawned at that, actually yawned. "You won't expel me," he said with a rueful smile. It was like he had long held this card readied to play. Even if he had not wanted to play it yet, or ever, if he could help it. But lost he had, and played he did. "You were never going to expel me. So will you let me go back to sleep?"

"And why," Phineas growled, "Are you so damned confident of that, *Mudblood*?"

Dantanian snuggled back down under the covers. "Because," he said through another yawn, "You can't expel your own nephew."

Astarte Noir, Part Three

Chapter Notes

Playlist

My dearest genius,

You must stop these letters and presents. They are unasked for and unneeded. We cannot be together again, no matter what new arguments you try and assail my conscience with, clever boy. My conscience is clear on this point. It is not safe for you to be near me anymore.

I have told you of the circumstances of our son's birth. I can still imagine your horror, as you wrote back denying what I saw with my own eyes. You said it must have been a fire from somewhere or someone else. You even accused my mother, with her fresh in the ground. Since years have passed and you will not put aside the idea of her guilt, you must know the truth. Tell no one of this, and destroy this letter as soon as it is read. This is the truth about our son Dantanian.

Dantanian was the cause of the fire, and my mother its foe. She attempted to stop it from spreading, even as some curse in him attempted to spread it. The minute he emerged from my womb, the world was on fire, and it would not stop until all for kilometres around us but him and I were dead. Should the cord not have been still intact between us, I sometimes wonder if I might not have perished as well. I told Mother to flee, but she tried to use her great powers to contain the fire, and save the many hundreds inside the hospital. But when she would not go, and would not stop, the infant in my arms turned his face upon her, with eyes of purest black, and cut her throat without a touch, with nothing but the blink of an eye. She fell to the ground and I know not still whether she bled or burned to death. Her body along with so many others burned too completely for any sign of death to be left other than the blaze.

I do not know either what it was in Dantanian that set the blaze, or if a newborn could have any choice or will in such destruction. I believe it was either his magic itself, or the curse in our blood, from the House of Black. I am not even sure the magic came from my boy, and not myself. You laughed at my mother's prophecy, when I told you it must part us, but it was proven truer than she would ever know. Without any understanding of the boy I am raising, I cannot have any security in anything, let alone whether you could return to my side without it costing your life.

Let go of me, my faithful genius. Turn yourself back only to your paints, and make pictures fully new to the world, to be hung in the Louvre and great palaces and be admired centuries later by wondering eyes. Or find another muse, a more beautiful woman, who has nothing to intrigue except her beauty, and paint her. For me. I will remain by my son's side. Whatever he

is, whatever I am, I love him. And you must accept that makes it impossible for me to love you.

Never and always your muse,
Astarte

Dantanian was with Phineas again, this time in the Headmaster's office, quite different from the days of Dumbledore. Either Dumbledore, or the limp noodle headmaster Dippet between the two, must have done considerable redecoration. Dantanian had in hand the fatal letter, legible over his shoulder, and one expected him to crumple, however restored his health looked by passing time. But he merely straightened in his chair with the posture of a statue, and told his new uncle, "It's a lie, of course."

There was a whole constellation of different stars with their different lights in the hitherto uncomplicated gaze of the headmaster, whose blanket hostility now regarded an object as anomalous as anyone could design. Dantanian was so confident in his dismissal of the letter, it must have seemed daunting to make the boy so much as question it.

Phineas, being a Black, made the attempt. "Did she instruct you she would tell this lie?"

Dantanian shrugged carelessly, hair braided in a long, neat whip again. He seemed to wear his awareness, of Phineas's awareness, of his true identity, as a cloak, protecting him. "I was seven when she died, I wouldn't have understood. She would have told me when I was older, she was telling me everything. But there was no need. It's obvious that she made that up, to impress on a very impressionable Muggle that he needed to leave us alone. This is dated years after my birth, and days before his suicide. She tried to sever ties decisively, while giving him a reason to carry on. Obviously, she was unsuccessful, but-"

Phineas held up a hand, but that didn't arrest Dantanian until he actually spoke over him. "Was that the only part of the prophecy Marie Weston made from her flames?"

It was hard for an onlooker to believe Dantanian did not believe what he said, even knowing the truth. "That was the prophecy, yes. My mother told me everything, even the words, though I was too young to remember them now. She wanted me to be mindful of the strength of my magic, when I was old enough to wield it in-"

"Your grandparents seem to think it true," Phineas pressed, "Or they would not have sent this letter to the Ministry of Magic, along with Muggle papers of disownment."

Dantanian crossed his legs, long slender boot dangling in the air in a perfect painting-like arch of black. "You don't even know if they believe it, or they're just using it like Mother did- to sever a tie that had become too burdensome to bear. Obviously, with the report of my... 'criminal activities'..." Dantanian contrived to make those words sound ludicrous, despite referring to an Azkaban breach. "They had sufficient grounds, but my grandmother is the type of woman to make absolutely sure a message goes through."

"It was appended to the forward papers as a warning, for whoever took on your charge. Naturally, I was contacted as Hogwarts headmaster, and the officials seemed eager to allow someone to take charge. I also took the liberty of removing this letter from your file. I do not believe any eyes saw it but my own." Phineas did not stop Dantanian from taking the letter and pocketing it. "It is still the question what is to be done with you."

Dantanian's foot swayed in the air languidly. Phineas's incensed eyes followed the motion, growing darker. "I'm an emancipated minor, right? In both worlds? And still called Daniel Shaw."

Phineas pinched the bridge of his nose again. "This fire upon your birth-"

"Do I seem like I could do that now, much less as an infant? Let alone kill a skilled pyromancer. The prophecy didn't specify who the flames would come *from*. I'd imagine it was my mother, she'd had some spurts of spontaneous fire but never been able to control her pyromancy. The pain and trauma of birth likely brought out the latent-"

"You have no-" Phineas looked vaguely nauseated at his own idea. "No pyromancy?"

Dantanian was indeed a fearsome liar. "None," he said, as lightly as if it was no matter one way or another. "But I *am* of your blood, sir. Do you believe me now?"

"It was only right that I investigate your claims," Phineas sighed, looking between the letter and the sixteen-year-old that it called a murderer at birth. "I have since, and this fire. The conflagration is real, whatever its cause. Over three hundred Muggles died in it. Your mother, though, you say." He seized upon the excuse for Dantanian, as if an infant at the time would even know. "But yes, I do believe you truly Dantanian now- unless you have directed your grandparents in this..."

"Just how much plotting do you think me capable of? I didn't plan to fail at Azkaban. That should have meant death. It almost did. I planned to succeed."

"You never told me why you made the attempt to infiltrate the prison."

"Because it's obvious. I've read about Neil Palmer, and what the papers say he did to my mother. I wanted to hear it from his own mouth."

"His confession was documented fully by the authorities. Was it worth risking yourself against a prison full of Dementors, simply to hear the repetition?"

Dantanian laughed. "Fine, you've caught me. Honestly, I thought to try and hurt him. But now that I've seen Azkaban and real Dementors, I think a lifetime of that is punishment enough. I'll leave the monster to the other monsters."

Phineas looked to have little idea what to do about the walking anomaly- or perhaps anathema- sprawled across the chair before him. "In any event, I must continue to investigate your claims further," Phineas began, and held up a hand when Dantanian opened his mouth to protest. "And speak of this, with my wife."

When the memory ended, Dantanian's confident face changed to a furious one, incongruous with the glitter of so many Galleons. He was back in the headmaster's office, some months older, hair still braided but more strands around his face, as if to reflect a grown disorder within. The origin of the fallen gold became clear, as Dantanian's pale long-fingered hand savagely hurled one last palmful of Galleons across the floor.

Phineas was at his desk looking the same, save a bit paler. "I am not going to pick that up for you, Dantanian."

"Good! I don't want it!" Dantanian slammed his hands on the edge of Phineas's desk. Some of the papers slid off to join the gold. "Money? You're offering me *money*?" A sizable amount of it, especially a century ago.

"This," Phineas said neutrally, "Should be more than enough to keep you in luxurious comfort and safety for the summer. I said I would provide for you, and I have."

"I thought you would-" Dantanian bit his lip, looking less composed than he had against Dementors. "I thought you'd give me a place to stay! That you'd take me in as your family. I'm your nephew!"

"You," Phineas said more coldly, "Are nothing of the sort. Our bloodline is *always pure*-"

"You can't undo that your father fucked my grandmother," Dantanian growled, making Phineas flinch back in distaste, "And my mother was your half-sister! It's blood! There's nothing stronger than blood!"

"Precisely," Phineas said, folding his hands. "The purity of blood is the founding principle of House Black. If you are not legitimate, you are not a Black, and not family-"

"So you offer me money. The same as your father, when he threw the woman he got pregnant out of the country! This isn't to take care of me, this is to shut me up-"

"I believe," Phineas interrupted, patience on the wane, "I am treating you more than fairly, mongrel-"

"The citadel."

Phineas leaned forward, a part of the conversation in a way he had not been before. "You know of Citadelle Xaphan?"

"Of course I do! My grandmother had so many pictures. My mother made paintings from them. They covered the walls, when I was young. So you can't acknowledge me, so you probably *never* said a word to your wife, but- let me stay at Citadelle Xaphan, away from prying eyes or suspicion-"

"Citadelle Xaphan is a sacred secret. Knowledge is reserved only for the heir-"

"But Marie-"

"And the heir's mistress, though I have certainly never taken part in such a disgraceful relation-"

"There's some solstice ritual for the heir's wedding, though-"

"To which traditionally only the heir's father, the lord, and the woman attend. The woman is kept blindfolded throughout-"

"So," Dantanian laughed more shakily, pushing the stray hair out of his eyes with a fitful gesture. "The other woman sees more of secrets than the true one. And I cannot ask admission to the citadel as your nephew, that honor would only go to your *mistress*-"

Something flickered in Phineas's eyes, not quite threat. "Take your money and go. You will have nothing else from me."

Dantanian picked up a handful of Galleons. One might have expected him to take the money. But he retrieved them to throw them again. This time, right in the face of his uncle, before he stalked out of the office as darkly as a Dementor.

Dantanian was standing in the Potions storeroom, hair loose and face hopeless, when Dorian Malfoy came in. He nearly stumbled into Dantanian before he realized. "Daniel!" he gasped, as he grabbed onto Dantanian's shoulders for balance. Dantanian's body did not register the touch, only his eyes, sliding to regard Dorian's arrival with dull malice.

"Malfoy. On an errand for Nott?"

"Professor Nott told me I could gather the ingredients for Amortentia," Dorian said, and the word made him fidget. "I mean- for Amaranthium- which, er, includes Essence of Amortentia-"

"I know your pureblood tradition. Making it early for your fiancé?" Dorian nodded, and Dantanian's face looked still more displeased with the entire world. "I wonder, though, after how *many* have graced your bed. What Amortentia must smell like for you."

Dorian looked like he would rather set the storeroom on fire than answer that. "I can, um, come back later. Professor Nott said Lamia should be done gathering the ingredients, for her independent study project, but if you're-"

"She is. We were speaking. I'd asked to stay with her over the summer." Dantanian pulled a handful of amaranth petals from the shelf behind him. When Dorian didn't take them, he laughed and tossed them in Dorian's face. Dorian watched them fall between them like slow-moving snow. "She wrote to her father. He said no. So I *am* on my own."

"You have grandparents, don't you? Those old Muggles who come to get you each year-"

"Not anymore."

"Oh," Dorian gasped, hands to his mouth, covering very pretty flushed lips. He had somehow contrived to become lovelier since the start of fifth year, which seemed impossible. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know they'd passed-"

"I wish." Dantanian did not explain the remark. "You wouldn't let me stay with you, would you?"

"Daniel, I- I never thought you saw me like-"

Dantanian snorted, running his eyes over Dorian's beauty as if it was fool's gold. "I'm not propositioning you, Malfoy. Not everyone on the planet wants you. I just need *some* place to stay. Somewhere I'd be safe. I think I might have enemies... enemies I don't understand. But if that's the *price* of staying with you..." He laid a hand on Dorian's arm, and the flush on Dorian's face went down his neck, lips parting helplessly. "Tell me what it would take."

"No!" Dorian exclaimed, wrenching back violently. Dantanian averted his face, rather than let Dorian see the woundedness on it. "I would never- use someone, and their situation- like- like *that*. That's *wrong*!"

"Should I be calling you Potter," Dantanian said with a twisted smile, "And not Malfoy?"

Dorian didn't seem to understand the remark. "My parents would never let me invite a-"

"Mudblood?"

"Muggleborn. My father hates that word too. He's the one who taught me not to use it. But it still wouldn't be seemly. I'm sorry. There's talk besides that we might summer with my aunt in Cannes-"

"The fiancé. What happened to keeping you apart? Avoiding the impression of incest?"

"It, er, seems they might think we're old enough. If you're in danger, though, Daniel, or even if you're not- if you need money, I can give you, no strings attached-"

"Forget it," Dantanian grabbed onto one of the racks, letting out an awful laugh. "Fine! Fine! That's it, then! I have to. I have to!"

"Daniel..."

Dantanian whirled on him. He seemed a decade older than Dorian, or more.

"You have a room of your own, don't you? Unofficially. I've heard rumors. Nott doesn't stop you, because you're a Malfoy. You've fit out some empty chamber in the dungeons, and that's where you hold your liaisons, right? Meet me there at midnight."

"Why?"

Dantanian was already leaving the storeroom. "You're going to pay. For a lot of other people's mistakes."

Incredibly, Dorian turned up at this secret chamber of his that night. His self-preservation instincts were not as strong as his curiosity, or a different force moving him. He walked up warily to find Dantanian waiting. He started back when Dantanian made the nearby torches flare at his arrival.

Dantanian laughed, sounding far younger. "Haven't you gotten used to that by now?"

"I'll never get used to that," Dorian said, shaking his head as he opened the door. It was an impressive illegal private chamber, hard to mistake as anything but a boudoir. It tended predictably towards Slytherin colors, with intricate sconce lights and chandelier in wrought silver, rugs black and green velvet, bureau and chests of deepest mahogany, and a bed the size of seven normal beds in shades of luxurious jade, decadent with velvet and silk and dozens of pillows of every imaginable kind. Dorian seemed to find it embarrassing to show Dantanian. "So I suppose you wanted to talk privately- *oh.*"

Dantanian's hair was still loose, but brushed soft and gleaming as torchlight on black stone. He tossed it out of the way with one twist of his elegant swan neck, before raising his hands to the throat of his black robes, and then the back.

He let them fall to his feet. There was nothing beneath them.

"Daniel," Dorian gasped, voice nearly cracking, and Dantanian toed off his boots. His moonstone-pale feet must have been cold on the crushed velvet, but he didn't flinch, as he used them to slide his boots and discarded robes away. That left him bare before Dorian's gaze, and yet all the vulnerability seemed Dorian's, light eyes drawn as helplessly as if Dantanian had enchanted him.

Dantanian frowned. "Did you think I would come here at this hour for anything else?" He ran a hand through his hair, pushing it out of the way. He was slender, shoulders and hips narrow with defined hipbones, paler than his mother with little of her rosiness, delicate blue veins visible under skin that seemed to show every bone beneath like carved alabaster. He had a small torso, but very long legs, with the only softness to his body visible at his inner thighs, sleek and soft-looking in a way that seemed to invite touch.

He was virtually hairless below his eyebrows, adding to the sloping androgyny of his frame, with long sleek dark ringlets pooling from his head down to his arms and chest. They were out of his eyes, which had never looked more large or haunting, as much an Inferi crawled from a grave as a vision of seduction.

Not that Dorian was looking at his eyes. His gaze had fixed between Dantanian's legs, and stayed on the pale rose shape of his member. It and swelled under his stare, whatever the room's cold.

Dantanian eventually grew impatient with Dorian being less Paris than Tantalus.

"I want you to take my virginity."

"Salazar." Dorian grabbed onto the bedpost. He scarcely seemed able to stand. "You... *you*..."

"Do you not want to?" Dantanian said a bit whinily, pouty lower lip protruding. "Do you not think me beautiful?" He took tentative steps forward, until he was within arm's reach. Then he gave Dorian a more graceful smile, and let his weight rest against the edge of the great jade bed, palms drawing inviting over the silk beneath. "My mother was beautiful."

"How..." Dorian's disbelief was that of the man who had just seen the heavens open, and an angel come down to him. "You. You want me to. Daniel Shaw. *Daniel*."

Dantanian did not correct him. He ran a hand down the arch of his ribs, to trace the ridge of his cock where it stood against the flat plane of his pale stomach, aroused and gleaming wet in chandelier flamelight. "I've cast all the spells we'll need. And I'm ready. You could do it right now. It wouldn't take long." His lips pouted more deeply. "I thought- you'll be with anyone. So many Slytherins, and other houses- but you can't do me a favor and just do this-"

"A *favor*?"

"Even if you don't want me."

"Want you- *Daniel*." Dorian pulled Dantanian's hand to him. He set it against his robes, then between his legs, letting him feel, and Dantanian's eyes sparked again. "Does it feel like I don't *want* you?" Dantanian smiled, the slightest curve to his lips, and Dorian leaned to kiss him. Dantanian turned away.

"There's no need for that," Dantanian said clinically. "You can just get it over with."

"Please, *please* let me kiss you." Dorian's hands went up to touch his cheeks, gently tucking his dark curls out of the way behind his ears. Dantanian looked oddly more nervous than when he thought Dorian didn't want him. "I- I will, I'll do it, whatever you want, just don't tell me I can't *kiss* you-"

Dantanian linked his hands behind Dorian's neck and pulled him into the kiss he demanded. Dorian's mouth met his still open, breath unsteady and wet and uncertain. Dantanian kissed him with the unskilled excitement of one who had never been kissed before. That did not deter Dorian. He gave in to the kiss and took it over, pulling Dantanian's face up to kiss properly, eyes falling shut while Dantanian's stayed open. It was not in detachment. His pupils were dilating, dark eyes wild, and he was the first one to moan into the kiss. He made a childish protesting noise, and then some little confused ones, when Dorian pulled away.

He moaned again when Dorian climbed onto the bed, blown-out pupils wider as Dorian undressed for him. Dorian's body was nearly as pale as his, arousal just as clear. He was toned and shaped tight and strong, perhaps not by the exertion of anything more athletic than sex, as experienced as Dantanian was new to it, as he climbed on top of Dantanian and kissed him again. They were a startling sight, their combined beauty so surreal it was unsettling. They would have seemed some impossible painting, of two different ideals, were it not for Dorian's still disbelieving murmurs. "You are beautiful, of course you are, you're *so* beautiful..."

No force seemed likely to part or even delay them, but the memory stayed as they came together, at first nervous on both parts and then just loud, air full of choked moans and whimpers as Dantanian guided Dorian's fingers to feel where he was prepared for him. "You really want me to?" Dorian asked, and Dantanian took him in hand and pulled him inside him.

Dorian was lost, rutting immediately in without any control. He was fully inside Dantanian with one thrust and then rocked in again and again, for all the world like he was the virgin, so overwhelmed he seemed by the feast beneath him. Dantanian did not try to slow him, moaning encouragingly as his head fell against the pile of jade pillows. His hair crested like a waterfall down over the silk, sliding hypnotically as Dorian's thrusts pulled his body all over the bed. Dantanian first bit back his cries, and then could no longer, closing his eyes at last as he screamed. Dorian slowed, asking if it hurt, and Dantanian didn't answer. "Just do it," he ordered, "I want to feel you, Dorian," and there was nothing Dorian could have done but obey.

Dorian did not last as long as one might have thought, for someone with such supposed prowess. But it was likely better for Dantanian's sake, however much he had seemed to love the new feeling. When Dorian withdrew from him, there was blood across Dantanian's thighs. That did not stop Dantanian, though, from cleaning himself with a wave of his wand, and rolling on top of Dorian.

"You should have done it harder. I want to feel you for *days*-"

Dorian's fingers slid Dantanian's curls behind his ears again. "If you wait, maybe if we do it again, I can-"

"Oh, we're going to do it again. But this time, I want to be the one inside you."

Dorian claimed he didn't often do it that way, but it did not seem hard for Dantanian to convince him. The memory lingered and lingered until Dantanian got what he wanted and made Dorian come beneath him, and they had both spilled their seed inside each other. They were still kissing drowsily, bodies stuck in a way that almost looked permanent, before they fell asleep, and the memory came to a close.

Dantanian was back in the headmaster's office, pleading his case still. The Galleons were in the room, looking the same amount or perhaps more, but piled neatly atop the desk. "I am your blood. My mother was your sister. You knew about her, and my mother, and me, and you just let us stay exiled, even when your father was gone. If you had taken her in, maybe what happened at the hospital wouldn't have happened. Maybe she wouldn't have been-"

"Dantanian." Phineas leaned back in his chair. "I am sorry, but your blood is full of filth. If you think I feel ties of kinship to you, you are as unintelligent as your grades would suggest." His words did not seem calculated to hurt Dantanian's feelings. It was rather as if emotion had never entered the equation. "Take the gold and go on your way."

"Please." Dantanian was almost begging. "Please, Uncle Phineas-"

"Do not ever call me that again-"

"Please let me see the citadel. Please let me stay there, please-"

"I am the head of House Black, and I understand the meaning of that. You do not, as a half-breed, but I do. Nothing will change my resolution. You have nothing to offer me that would change my mind-"

"Don't I?" Dantanian breathed, seeming to force out the words. His face changed as if a decision had been made, and a light in his eyes extinguished. "*Don't* I?" Phineas looked unaffected, until Dantanian stalked over to Phineas's side of the desk, to stand over him with those miserable eyes. "I know I do, Black. I know."

Phineas's gaze was suddenly far from certain with their proximity. Dantanian braced a hand on the desk, leaning over him, and the edge of his loose Ravenclaw tie brushed the headmaster's shoulder. Phineas shuddered but did not try to move it. "What do you think you know?"

"I know the way you look at me. I know why you want so badly for me not to call you uncle." He laughed mirthlessly. "I know how to get to Citadelle Xaphan."

"You-" Phineas gathered himself straighter. "I don't know what you're implying."

Dantanian's lip twitched, misery in his eyes complete. Then his gaze lowered, lashes lowering with it, turning his stare half-lidded and heavy. "You can do it, Black. I won't stop you. If you'll just promise, that tomorrow, when the term is over, you'll take me to Citadelle Xaphan."

"Do-" Phineas repeated, and licked his lips.

His eyes did not seem to know where to go. But it was unmistakable. There was hunger in them- well-hidden before, but there was no holding back. He stared at Dantanian, and stared, and could not stop staring everywhere, all over him.

"I know what you want from me," Dantanian said, and touched Phineas's hand, and then his face. Phineas did not stop him. "You said it yourself, we're not family. Not blood. You can do anything you want. Right here, right now. You can be my first-"

Phineas grabbed Dantanian by his long hair, yanking him to him in one pull. "Not just a mongrel but a whore?"

"Just promise you'll take me to the citadel. Tomorrow."

Sluggish but sure, Citadelle Xaphan swam into view.

Even if it was hardly recognizable as such. It more closely resembled the plans Gilderoy had found in the library tower. Towers cut the morning sky like raised blades, disrepair and crumbling visible but standing still. Obsidian adornment curled over the roofs of towers and

rooms and halls, gargoyles and arches and designs like stucco that caught ocean sunlight with violent clarity. The castle was not whole, but sections were, entire groups of towers with roofs over them. As lonely and forsaken the fortress looked, there was also something inviting to those halls.

The vision was only from a distance. Then the drawbridge went down, with a wave of the wand of Phineas Black. Phineas strode over the bridge, only to see Dantanian still standing alone.

Dantanian looked as paralyzed as Dorian had when he offered himself to him. As glorious as the citadel was, in this much lesser a state of decay, there was a fascination in his eyes disproportionate to it there, like he saw something in the citadel that neither Phineas, nor anyone viewing the memory, could see.

Something like madness was on his face. Or perhaps it was Dantanian himself, questioning whether he had gone mad. It could be that a part of him, as much as he loved looking at the pictures and listening to his mother's secondhand tales, had never truly believed them real.

"Mon dieu," Dantanian breathed, and rubbed his eyes like he could not believe what they were seeing. "Mon *dieu.* It's Xaphan. *Xaphan*."

Phineas walked back, with a condescending affection in his gaze that was chillingly new. "Dante," he said indulgently, taking his hand. "No need to look so surprised. It is just as I promised, is it not?"

Dantanian's face went from open awe to something else, when he was forced to remember Phineas's existence. Maybe that look was calculation, as he clearly wanted to let go of Phineas's hand, but did not even try. "Yes. Thank you, Headmaster."

"Call me Finn," said Phineas, and led Dantanian into the citadel.

"Dracosanguis," cast Dantanian, and nothing happened. The snake on the crimson Persian carpet merely peered up, inquiring.

Dantanian sat cross-legged in a bedchamber not unlike Dorian's secret one in the dungeons. But it was in an array of different colors, the red-purple-gold-bronze and deep yellow of the rooms reminiscent of the shades of Astarte's flat in Paris. There was a painting of her on the wall nearby, but not with the skill of Jackson Shaw's, though with just as much care. It was signed Dantanian Noir, as were two smaller portraits of her, hung behind a wall of bohemian and eastern-patterned curtains and gauze. It would have been lovely, but for the half dozen dying snakes riddled over the carpet around Dantanian's feet.

"Dracosanguis," Dantanian cast, and the snake let out a hissing sound of agony.

Dantanian's hair was thick and ample as ever, pulled in a rough, careless ponytail. His body was just as carelessly covered, in a deep crimson silk robe that looked in Japanese style, hanging open across his pale chest. It suited him, especially the subtle bronze wave pattern

that decorated the red, but for a tightness across his shoulders, which suggested the robe had been made for a woman. Perhaps it had been, to judge by the open wardrobe in the room's corner, half-filled with far more robes and skirts and trousers and fine dresses than anyone could have acquired, in what looked to be a short time indeed. The historical style of some of the dresses, with one on display on a hyper-realistic blonde mannequin, suggested a different time. With the doubled or many-layered style of its massive bell skirts, low necks, and short flared flounce sleeves, it was likely 1830s or 1840s. These clothes, the robe Dantanian wore, and perhaps this room, had belonged to Marie Weston.

Marie Weston might have been capable of the spell Dantanian was casting. All the dying or now-dead snakes were charred or black or red and open, and the air was misted with a thickening layer of smoke. "Dracosanguis," Dantanian cast, "Dracosanguis, Dracosanguis," and the snake seemed to set on fire, not on the surface but from within. Once the snake's end split and the magic could be seen working right at the arteries, it was clear the spell was setting its *blood* on fire.

Once the snake was dead, Dantanian let out a yawn, before casting Serpensortia. Another narrow green snake appeared for a swift fate. Except a voice called from outside, "Dante? I'm back," and Dantanian put down his wand with a sigh. Phineas walked into the room with his dark hair and black robes soaking wet, looking in a foul mood.

"Oh, is it raining outside?" was all Dantanian asked. Phineas let out a noise at the contents of the carpet, but Dantanian made no effort to conceal it.

"What," Phineas breathed, pointing with an unsteady finger, "Is this?"

"I'm practicing," Dantanian whined, doll face scrunching up. "It's a spell I've been working on. It's coming along." At Phineas's appalled look, Dantanian laughed shamelessly. "What? I told you I like working on spell creation. Vipera evanesca," he cast, and the remnants disappeared in one wave of his wand.

"You are quite skilled with practical spells," Phineas said tightly, "For the Ravenclaw with the lowest grades in your year for five years running."

Dantanian put his wand on the nightstand. "What's wrong, Finn?" he said, in a cooing, meretricious voice. "It seems you braved a tsunami to see me. Do you wish to quibble over *grades*-"

"What is a tsunami?" Phineas asked, discarding his wet cloak as he came towards Dantanian. After his initial dismay, there was nothing like real fear on his face. Even if perhaps there should have been.

Dantanian rolled his eyes, startlingly insolent. "Don't you know *anything*? Dantanian Black was a master of meteorology-"

"Ah, your namesake. I have seen the observatory-"

"As well as the cosmos, I was going to say." Dantanian gave him a playfully judgmental look. "Meteorology means the study of weather. Not astronomy, or *meteors.* Finn, it's not very

attractive, this kind of ignorance-"

Phineas took Dantanian by the collar of his robe and threw him onto the bed. He pulled the tie from his hair and dragged his face back up by it. The tug looked and sounded painful. "Do I seem in the mood for disobedience tonight?" He stared at Dantanian's exposed throat with eyes like Fenrir Greyback, or any savage wolf.

Dantanian lowered his gaze. "No, Finn," he said more softly, "I'm sorry," and pulled his robe open.

"Teach me," Phineas said.

"I'm trying," Dantanian sighed. Phineas pointed his wand at a waiting snake with a scowl.

"Dracosanguis." Nothing happened. "This is the motion, isn't it?" Dantanian nodded. "Dracosanguis. Dracosanguis!" It seemed he had been failing for some time, to judge by depth of frustration. "You have none of your grandmother's pyromancy, you say. The spell *should* be possible for me, then, if it is for you, inventor or not!"

Dantanian made a face. "Didn't you have a meeting at Hogwarts?"

Phineas cursed and walked straight out of the observatory, though not without grabbing Dantanian's head and pressing a kiss to his long braid. Dantanian smiled at him, though his face turned to irritated relief the moment Phineas was gone. He went over to the shelves full of books, picked one out, and opened it to a marked place. Then he Vanished all the snakes, save the one still alive.

"Diffindo," he cast, and drew his wand in the air over the snake, cutting it lengthwise. Then he covered his hands in the blood, and approached the plainest part of the observatory, a blank dark slab of a door. He did not hesitate to raise his stained hands to it and begin to draw. He had the swift ease of an artist who had been practicing more this summer, making the picture in his mind come right to reality. That picture was of snakes and stars.

He laid the end of his braid on the unadorned stone floor. He cast Diffindo wordlessly this time, severing the end, and left strands of hair. Then he leveled his wand at the door. "Dignusanguine," he said. "Worthy blood. I am the one worthy to claim the legacy of Dantanian Black. I am the true heir to House Black!"

He clearly found his own words ridiculous. He laughed at himself as they did nothing. He did not seem to have expected it to work. "Dignusanguine," he cast, then glanced back at the book. "Cursed for everyone but a worthy descendent, with the power to wield the weapon within. Either I'm weak, or I'm unworthy. Mother, you have some explaining to do. I might have saved the *hair*."

Then he stiffened, almost like he felt his mother had spoken back. "Might as well give it a shot," he said, raised his wand, and cleaned his hands. Then he cut his left palm open, enough for blood to pool over the skin. He didn't seem to feel the pain of it.

He walked towards the door with a more fatal air, each step seeming to echo despite the small crowdedness of the observatory. It might have been an illusion from the dark gleam of his eyes, as he moved to bring his hands together only to frown. Then, with the same reflexive accuracy as when a very young child, he moved his hand in the air, and blood from his palm lifted in individual droplets, climbing. It settled above the first wheel. Then he began to draw on the air, far more quickly than with fingertips. Another wheel formed on the door, this time in his own blood.

Dantanian didn't bother to heal his palm, just grabbing his wand. "Dignusanguine-"

He barely had time to finish the incantation before the unopenable door opened.

The memory ended before anything was visible beyond the door, save for a distant glow like moonlight.

"Daniel Shaw is not your real name. Because you're not really male."

"What, you mean it's really Danielle?" Lamia said dryly.

Dantanian cast a careful look towards Lamia, before leaning to whisper his reply in Dorian's ear.

"That has to be the worst guess yet," he hissed, "Given your... personal experience, that attests I am."

Dorian flushed, hair still crisp and moonlight-blond at his shoulders, and raked a hand through it before retorting in another whisper, "Polyjuice. Or- some other spell. Maybe one you invented."

Dantanian leaned back, to say in a more ordinary voice, "Just because I'm prettier than any girl you know, Malfoy, doesn't mean I *am* one."

"Prove it," Dorian said, and Lamia made a face.

"Oh, that makes sense, he's just being a pervert," she sighed. "Wait- Daniel, you aren't actually going to let him check, are you?"

"He'll never leave me alone about it otherwise!" Dantanian let Dorian lead him away towards the dungeon stairs, even as the entrance feast seemed soon to start. Being a prefect and a Malfoy, no one seemed to consider trying to stop him. Dantanian was the one to cast a nervous glance at the high table. But Phineas was speaking to Nott, so Dantanian went.

He stopped Dorian the moment they were out of sight. He cast some wordless charm, presumably to keep them from being heard. "Go ahead, then. Check." He gestured downward.

"I didn't actually mean- are you mad?" Dorian sputtered. "I just- Daniel, I couldn't wait any longer to talk to you alone. I don't know if you got my letters-"

"No. And don't write me any more letters ever again. Are you going to check or what?"

"Fine!"

He gently pressed Dantanian against the landing's stone wall. Dantanian's gaze fixed on him with less surety, proximity affecting him, doubly so when Dorian's hand settled on his chest and trailed downward.

"Go ahead," Dantanian said with put-on disdain, "Make sure it's real," and Dorian's hand slid inside his trousers. Dantanian seemed to put all the effort in the world into appearing unaffected. He failed. His teeth raked over his lower lip, so hard it went white, but he still whimpered as Dorian's hand cupped him. He made an almost protesting noise when Dorian's hand slid back out.

"Everything, ah," Dorian said shakily, "Seems to be in order," and Dantanian glared. Their eyes met, and locked, and then Dorian leaned forward. Dantanian did not push him back, and Dorian kissed him.

Dantanian's arms went around Dorian's neck, kissing him back with enthusiasm, and, if Dorian had been observing the situation analytically, far more skill than the last time. But Dorian was just kissing Dantanian as hard as he could. "I missed you," he breathed against Dantanian's lips, bracing his hands beside Dantanian's face on the wall as he kissed him. "I missed you so much..."

The fingers of his left hand turned to stroke tenderly at Dantanian's braid.

Dantanian pushed him away. "Don't," he panted, "Don't," and Dorian stepped back, looking guilty.

"I'm sorry- I didn't mean to- I thought you wanted-"

Dorian had the grace not to bring up that Dantanian had kissed him back. After practically making him touch his cock.

"I don't..." Dantanian banged his head back against the wall, closing his eyes. "*No*!"

"Daniel, I'm sorry. What's wrong-"

The sound of the false name seemed to bring Dantanian back to reality. "You- you've verified, um, what you... wanted to verify," he said feebly, then stood. He looked like he wanted to rub his head, where he'd hit it on purpose like a house elf. "So... that's it."

"I know we have to go to the feast. But you, ah, do you want to, maybe, uh, hang out sometime- you could come to my room tonight- and we, when it's time for it, we could go to Hogsmeade together-"

Dantanian stepped away. "No, Dorian. That can't happen. None of it can." Dorian opened his mouth, looking protesting. "Forget about what happened at the end of last year. Pretend it never did."

"I don't understand-"

"Malfoy." Dantanian pulled from between Dorian's fingers. Their hands had to brush, untangling it carefully finger by finger. They both stared where their hands touched, before Dantanian pulled his away. "I'm not interested. Look elsewhere, to your many, many, *many* admirers-"

"I met my fiancé, but we didn't- do anything, if that's what you're thinking-"

"You say that as if you expect me to care," Dantanian said icily, though his eyes still had an uncharacteristic tenderness on Dorian's face. "It's alright. Sooner or later, the Malfoy heir *will* have to be born."

"You'd do the same thing in my position," Dorian said defensively.

Dantanian's face went truly cold, a distance thrown between them that Dorian could never have understood. "Yes. I would. In your position. But I'm not, am I?"

"Is that why? Because I'll be married someday-"

It might have been easier to go with that excuse, but Dantanian didn't. "No," he said flatly. "Even if you weren't, even if you were proposing marriage to me, *this?* You and me is never going to happen. Accept it and move on."

"Why?" was all Dorian could ask, finally. He looked on the verge of tears.

"I just can't," Dantanian said, and turned back towards the entrance feast, where the headmaster was giving his speech.

"I show not your face, but your heart's desire," read Dantanian, and pouted.

The Mirror of Erised sat before Dantanian in a great obsidian holding case, in a room full of moonstones. The only things in the vast room were shelves full of tomes and notebooks, the mirror and its backing, and those stones. Moonstones stretched along the floor, walls, and ceiling in an oval covering as far as the eye could see. There was no place not covered in their smooth shapes, none exactly identical although all roughly ovals.

The obsidian that held the Mirror of Erised was like a great hollowed and trisected obelisk, the same look to it as the obsidian on the castle, but not suffered a day of erosion since its carving. There was a long slender wall of it behind the mirror, and two to its sides, forming an equilateral triangle at the center of the room, though the walls hid its other two sides from view. It was like a great misshapen wheel that did not turn. The mirror looked almost tawdry in comparison, despite its gilt frame.

That impression was doubled, when the only thing reflected on its long reflective magic surface was blue flames.

They were not small mist-like flames like Dantanian liked to work from his fingers, nor of any particular shape. These were blue-white flames of pure destruction. And that was what Dantanian saw in the Mirror of Erised.

"If you're supposed to show me my heart's desire," Dantanian complained, "Show me my mother. I want to see her face. Maybe then I could finally paint her properly this summer." But the Mirror of Erised, as many would testify, did not bend to any entreaties, nor threats or even attempts at destruction. Nor did it even when encased in what seemed to be *its place*, or at least a place made for it. "Show me Maman," he said again, voice cracking. "I can't get her right."

He waited for a long time. The flames just kept burning. "At least show me Dorian, then."

He was ignored all the same. "You're as useless as the other two," he groaned. "Finestra!"

The mirror and its flames remained untouched.

"All I want," Dantanian said, "Is to see my mother."

It was his grandparents' house, in the hallway outside his father's old studio. His grandparents in pajamas looked a little older. Elizabeth had her body between Dantanian and the studio door, while Frederick stood behind him. Neither Elizabeth nor her grandson seemed inclined to pay much heed to Frederick's mediation efforts anymore.

"You mean you want to steal from us," Elizabeth said grimly. "I wondered if this day would come. You want to take our son's paintings."

Dantanian had not drawn his wand, but he might not particularly need one. The old Muggles looked as frightened as if he had. If this had been a different country, one of them might have had a shotgun to draw on him. "You mean my father's paintings," Dantanian said, fingers twitching in the air. "I don't want any quarrel. You didn't need to get up, I would have been in and out. I won't take or damage your property. All I want is the pictures of *my* mother-"

"They're all we have left of him, lad," Frederick said, reaching to touch Dantanian's shoulder, but seeming to think better of it before the touch. "We could have sat down and discussed this- come to a compromise, but breaking in, in the middle of the night-"

"Like we *sat down and talked* about you disowning me, and sending that letter? Step aside."

"No!" Elizabeth said defiantly, backing up against the door. "You have no right to anything of his! He would still be *alive* if your mother had never-"

"Speak ill of her, and I will be less patient." Dantanian turned with a softer face to Frederick. "I don't want trouble. Honestly. Even after you disowned me. I know the debt I owe. You did feed and clothe and shelter me for years, and I wasn't- as appreciative as I might have been. You pleaded with the school not to expel me, even if it was just so I'd be off your hands. You let me see your books. And you never hit me." Finishing what sounded a planned speech, he

returned to Elizabeth with new spite. "That letter you sent trying to ruin me. Did you find it before you adopted me?"

"Years before." The hall was only lit by the candles, both under lanterns that diffused their insufficient light. Elizabeth's face over it looked indescribably hateful, like an effigy meant to soon be burned. "Years. I've always known what you were, devil child. But I wanted to be wrong. I tried to be friendly when we met you. I tried to be so kind, but look at you You look just like her now."

"I said if you speak ill of her-"

"Don't provoke him, Elizabeth," Frederick pleaded, and was ignored.

"All I want," Dantanian steadily, "Is my birthright."

"No!" Elizabeth yelled. "You deserve *nothing*!"

"Alohomora." In the tense silence of the hall, they could all hear the sound of the lock clicking open. "You can't keep me out. Give me my birthright, woman. Think about what I can do if you don't. If you believe what that letter said about my *other* grandmother."

"Please, Dantanian, don't hurt her," Frederick gasped.

"You said my name," Dantanian marveled. "All these years, and you finally said it. I wonder what it would take to get it out of *her*."

"Call yourself what you like," Elizabeth snarled, eyes darting. "But get out of my house! Or we'll send for the police-"

"I could kill you so many different ways," Dantanian said softly, "Before you came close to making the call."

"Dantanian!" Frederick did try to take his shoulder then. When Dantanian whirled with his wand drawn, he lifted his hands in the air, backing away. "She is your *kin*-"

"Because that meant so much to *her*, all the times she hit me-"

"Do not speak of murder, though." Frederick bowed his head humbly. "Remember the times you went to church with us. Remember the verses of the Bible. The golden rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And the Old Testament, Dantanian. An eye for an eye. Just that."

Dantanian smiled ironically. "I have hated few things, more than I hated going to *church*. Elizabeth Shaw, I will not ask you again."

"Elizabeth, maybe you should..."

"No!" she yelled frantically. "Jackson was my son! My only child! Mine! I can't, Fred, I can't let him take away what's left of him-"

"An eye for an eye?" Dantanian regarded Elizabeth, with the candlelight casting a glow that did not seem to reach his eyes. And then light was everywhere, Frederick and Elizabeth screaming as the candles flared in their lanterns and made them drop them. Then they were surrounded in that ordinary hallway by a rising wall of orange fire.

"An eye for an eye, is it? I'm only to hurt her as much as she hurt me? But do you know, Grandpa? Do you know how it hurt, for her to keep me from my father's paintings? To burn all the pictures I had of my mother? To hear her call my mother a whore? To have her *take away my name*?"

"I don't-"

"Don't worry. I'm in control of the fire." Dantanian walked forward, flames leaping a bit with each time his foot hit wooden floors that somehow did not burn. "Remember, I gave you the chance. You could have just let me take the paintings. *You* chose this." He tightened his hand on his wand. "An eye for an eye, and the whole world is blind. Crucio!"

Elizabeth fell to the ground, convulsing uncontrollably. Invisible strings seemed to pull her limbs in unnatural contortions, fire near her face showing every bit of the agony that seized her, an agony beyond even the common Cruciatus curse. It was like the formless hands pulling her limbs like they wanted to wrench them off her body were succeeding, and yet were cruel enough somehow to keep them on still. Just to keep her suspended shaking in that exact moment when they broke off and her whole body was coming apart.

"Elizabeth!" Frederick screamed. He threw himself onto Elizabeth, shaking her. "What did he do to you? Stop it, Dantanian! Please stop it-"

Elizabeth screamed and Dantanian frowned, unmoved. "No," he said to himself. "No, it's not enough, is it? It's not as much as I was hurt. It's not even close. Grandpa, get out of the way."

"She's my wife, I love her, please, I can't just let her-"

"Then I'll hurt you too," Dantanian said without remorse. "Crucio!"

The convulsions threw Frederick half a meter into the air, jerked by some ghostly hand, before he was rolled over the wood and nearly into the fire. A wave of Dantanian's hand made the flames recede, enough that they did not touch him. "Look at you. You're barely shaking anymore, Elizabeth. Crucio!"

Dantanian watched as Elizabeth writhed, keen dark gaze all analysis. "No," he said after she stilled for a second time. "No, it's nothing close. I'm sorry, Frederick, but you said it. An eye for an eye. It's so *kind*, the Cruciatus curse. Why is it so kind? Crucio!" He stomped his foot as she screamed and began to cry hysterically, hands clawing at her wet face as if she would give up the skin there to make the agony stop.

"Dantanian..."

Dantanian put out all the flames out around his grandfather. "Petrificus totalus," Dantanian said, voice almost kind. If not perhaps as kind as a Stunner would have been. It left Frederick

not writhing but motionless, only able to watch as his grandson cast the Cruciatus curse on his wife twice more, progressively more dissatisfied.

"Dracosanguis," he cast, and screams that had begun to quiet turned shriller than ever. The blood from where she hit her elbow falling began to burn. "Dracosanguis. Dracosanguis. Dracosanguis!" His eyes were sparking finally with excitement. "There, that's better, Elizabeth. Are you feeling it? Do you? Do you understand the pain now?"

Elizabeth had fallen unconscious, presumably from pain, though the blood still burned when he commanded it. He frowned and cast Enervate. She didn't wake up, though when he checked her throat for a pulse, he found it beating.

"Don't worry, she's still alive," Dantanian said to his grandfather. "Finite incantatem." Frederick just lay there.

Dantanian pushed the door open with his foot. His sole tread on his grandmother's white hair on the hardwood, as he stepped in past her. Then he went over with the calm of a man who believed himself unimpeachably in the right, and began to gather his father's paintings.

"Here it is, then," Dantanian said, eyeing seventh-year Dorian Malfoy with poorly concealed curiosity. "Your seventh and final guess. Your last chance to find out whatever you think I've hidden all these years." Dorian looked around for Lamia. "She's late," Dantanian said, tapping his fingers on the Ravenclaw table. "But you're on time. So guess."

"You're a bastard. A half-blood bastard."

Dantanian's fingers stopped tapping.

"Like my uncle Nicholas," Dorian went on without distaste, "But it wasn't a pureblood, it was a Muggle, or Muggleborn. Your father or mother is from some great pureblood house, maybe even in the Sacred Twenty Eight. But they wouldn't acknowledge you, because you're half-Shaw, or whatever the Muggle parent was called- so they had you put aside. So you have had some training, and you have powerful blood. That's your secret. That you were a great lord or lady's bastard."

Dantanian did not hesitate. "I'm sorry to say, but that is incorrect."

One might have thought him a liar. But Dorian was not totally right, just *almost*. He was a generation off.

"I suppose you'll never know, that supposed secret."

Lamia came up looking breathless. "Oh no, did I miss it? What did you guess?"

"There's no need," Dantanian cut in, "To dwell on Dorian's stupidity any more than necessary." The closeness of Dorian's guess seemed to put unusual savageness in his voice.

Dorian wilted. But he pressed a folded note into Dantanian's hand, before giving up and going over to Slytherin.

Dantanian opened and read it, with Lamia brimming with curiosity. He burned it after with a snap of his fingers. "What?" she pried. "Was it a love note? Is he after you this year? Still?"

Dantanian rubbed ashes between his fingers. "I don't understand why he keeps trying, when he's the one who has so much left to lose."

One might have almost thought Dorian would be absent from the memories then. But there was one short memory more, from what still seemed seventh year. It was Dorian with a trophy, in ornamental green and silver robes that made him grown-up and gorgeous, beaming with what looked the thrill of victory. One almost feared he had won the Triwizard Cup, and was about to receive a kiss to spirit him away to a graveyard.

"Hey!" he called, following Dantanian down a different hall, this one from the marble steps. "Daniel!"

Dantanian turned, and seemed to smile despite himself. "Shouldn't you be at your party, champion? It's not every year that a first-time competitor wins the whole thing."

Dorian preened. "I saw you watching the Hogwarts Grand Duel, Daniel. Were you rooting for me?"

"I was obviously rooting for your opponent, so I wouldn't have to hear about it if you won."

Dorian snorted. "Well, I did win, and you do have to hear about it."

Dantanian began to walk again. Dorian followed him, until they reached an abandoned classroom. "Why are you wandering after me, Malfoy? Do you expect some kind of congratulations? They'll be missing you at that- whatever passes for a festivity- down there-"

"I saw you were there. Watching. So I knew I had to win."

Dantanian's face went at once softer and more unhappy. "You know you wouldn't have won if *I'd* entered, don't you?"

Dorian just seemed grateful Dantanian was talking to him. "Why do you say that? You aren't even in the dueling club. And you're last in our year at Defense-"

Dantanian snapped his fingers. Fire appeared between them, blue-white curling in trails to form a perfectly drawn spiral. "You wouldn't have the nerve to *try* and duel me."

"Um," Dorian said, licking his lips. He had much the same look on his face as when Dantanian had asked him to touch his cock. "I, er, I think I'd manage to try."

"But you know you'd lose." Dantanian waved his hand and let the flame expand, lifting until it rose to the ceiling and then a corner of the room, like bluebell flames. Except it was not

mere globes and spirals to decorate this room, but constellations, small bursts and clusters of light that refined themselves and soon had nebulas and the space of lightyears between them. It was something like an Aurora Borealis appearing as if it had always been in that empty room, and just concealed. Dantanian smiled at this show of beauty in his indisputable power, and the Milky Way crystallized above them, a sea of stars that looked unending, if you didn't look down.

"Salazar," Dorian whispered, staring up. His gaze soon fastened with more awe, though, on Dantanian's face lit by flame-stars.

"There's your congratulations, Malfoy."

They watched each other, for a very long and protracted moment of suspension, and then Dantanian leaned forward like he couldn't help himself, and pressed a kiss to Dorian's cheek. "Congratulations, Dorian."

Dorian didn't follow Dantanian. One suspected he might have stayed for some time after, looking at the fire.

"Goodbye, Lamia," Dantanian said, and she nearly tripped on hard stone. She was older yet than she had looked at the start of seventh year, as unusually masculine-looking for her gender as Dantanian was feminine. They made an odd pair, descending the Hogwarts entrance steps with excited students streaming out around them. There was the look of the final day of term. The end of seventh year, then, and the end of Hogwarts for both.

"Don't say it like that," she said fiercely, and drew him aside once they were down the steps. "Just because your grandparents won't let you have guests, and my father won't invite you, that doesn't mean we'll never *see* each other again. I'm not going to let you go before you tell me what you're planning to do after you graduate and I'm sure you'll be alright-"

Dantanian began to walk again, not towards the train but Hogsmeade. Lamia looked dubious but followed. "Don't worry," he said casually, "I'll make sure you get home. I just have something to show you first."

They reminisced as they walked, with Lamia summoning her luggage as well as Dantanian's from the Hogwarts Express. "I left a note for the elves not to put it there," Dantanian whined. She looked at him fondly, as if thinking she would even miss his whining. They talked of times they had spent together, from when she overheard Dorian Malfoy speaking about her family curse and cried, to the looks on the professors' faces, when Dantanian refused to take any NEWTs at all.

She circled back to Dorian. "He's not going to be happy, you know. For you to leave like this, not on the train, and not even give *him* a proper goodbye."

"Lamia. Dorian Malfoy will be fine. Because he's Dorian *Malfoy*."

"He's not just that, though. I got to know him, doing our final potions project together- he's a nice person, he talks a lot about ideas his father has about social change- don't make that face, I know you didn't like it, but maybe you could have been my partner, if you hadn't gotten a Troll on your Potions OWL. Because you're better than just a Troll in Potions. And he's better than *just* a Malfoy."

"If you intend to keep championing a cause," Dantanian said wanly, "Which today has reached its definitive close, then I will not hesitate to set something about on fire and leave you behind." Once they were out of the Apparition wards, he pulled her into a Side-Along Apparition.

At first, the impression was that he had taken her to Citadelle Xaphan, or just outside its walls. They were on a white seaside cliff, with the sound and wind of ocean sweeping over as soon as they arrived. Dantanian made sure she didn't lose her footing on grass and uneven stone, leading her along the bright bluffs. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't just explain it. I had to show you."

There was no civilization as far as the eye could see, only grass and stone and the waves crashing against the cliffs very low below. They reached the edge, and Lamia drew her wand of all things, as if that would guard against fear.

"For someone in danger of someday becoming a reptile," he drawled, "You are frightfully afraid of heights," and laughed and hugged her, at her playful impression of trying to push him off the cliffs.

He led her to the place their cliff met another, looming so far above it shadowed them. In the furrows of the ancient water-worn stone, there were many turns and holes and hollows. Dantanian found one by memory, and pressed his wand against it. "The password," he said, "Is *Olympia Par Manet*." The small-cratered stone hollow opened out, into a larger hollow of darkness. "*Olympia Par Manet*," he repeated at her quizzical look. "Remember that. Olympia was a famous painting by Édouard Manet. He was my mother's favorite painter."

"Should I go inside?" Lamia asked nervously, and Dantanian smiled at her.

"Come on, we'll both fit." He wiggled his fingers, making blue fire spring out of them. She smiled at the sight, and let him lead her in by the hand. She gasped, as the flame lit up a hoard of moonstones. They were hidden in a great pile, like a treasure vault in the hollow dark.

"True moonstones? This must be worth a fortune. Dantanian, you didn't steal these, did you-"

"No," Dantanian said, and pressed another into her hand. "They are real, see? And they aren't stolen. They belong to me. They all do." He looked back out at the cloudless blue sky. "They're my birthright."

"This isn't just a fortune, this many," Lamia said, eyes seeming to start the calculation. "This is a hundred fortunes."

"And this the secret to the wealth of-" *House Black*, he must almost have said, or just *A very old family.* But he remained silent, then finished, "Daniel Shaw. Who, as you can see, is very much not penniless and destitute, in need of charity-"

"These are beautiful," Lamia said, "And I'm glad you have them," putting her stones back on the pile without reluctance. Avariciousness seemed neatly absent in her. "But Dantanian, this doesn't do a thing to tell me what you plan to *do.* Or even where you're going. I know you like your secrets, but..."

"Remember where these are. In case you ever need money or currency to trade, if you're in trouble and can't reach me. Or you can use them in spells, as you'd probably prefer." He grinned, baring his teeth. "They're very powerful." When she didn't smile back, he laughed, hugging her broader shoulders. "Don't worry. I *know* what I want to do, and where I want to go. *You* know, Lamia. I told you years ago. I'll just need time to prepare, to be sure I get it right this time."

"Azkaban," she said, and his smile grew wider.

Azkaban was tall and dark that night still, with an even greater storm. Some of the stray spray from a massive cresting wave splashed up to slapped the side of Dantanian's face, as he walked across the unhallowed black stone, steps taking him the same way as in third year. He looked older than the last memory, though not more than a year. The burst of water made him smile.

He seemed to be in no particular hurry, though the only greater assistance he seemed to have was a full moon above. Unless the pendant around his neck, hanging over his midnight blue cloak, was something charmed.

It likely was, moonstones melted in the way only magic could forge them. A jeweler's transfiguration, in a charm the size of a large man's hand. It was an Antipodean Opaleye, like his Patronus, and his mother's. Perhaps he thought it would make that Patronus stand up more formidably somehow, to the Dementors streaming around the cliff from either side.

They looked so much like before it had to be déjà vu, like a repeated nightmare. Except Dantanian barely seemed to *notice* them.

He looked back instead to where a human wizard rested. The man was in Azkaban guard's clothes- one could hardly ever mistake those after a stay in this unholy place- sprawled on the ground, temple bleeding, wand three meters away from him. Dantanian turned back at the sound, and his wand flashed out the red of an effortless Stunner, before he added, "Obliviate!" It might have been overkill, if the guard or the stunned bodies of others behind peaked the Dementors' interest. Dantanian left them behind.

When the ground before him was beginning to not just drip with mist, but form a sheen of ice, he pushed his back to the wall and checked the nearest number. *457.* Then he turned towards the Dementors, with the giddiness of a schoolboy on a first date.

"Here we go, Dantanian," he said to himself, "Here we go," and lifted his wand. "PROTEGO DIABOLICA!"

Blue fire surged out from the tip and everywhere, faster than one could have imagined without seeing it, the rush outward of the breath of an enraged dragon. Even if the glow was the same as a Patronus, meant to drive diabolical Dementors away- and Dementors were letting out high wordless screams, like they were *burning*.

The handful caught at the edge and touched by his flame were beginning to hiss out black smoke. It rose like another shield, behind the blue circle that was forming, and its dreamy mist. The rain that came down around Dantanian's feet, scarcely seeming to touch him, was tinged in black. Except it had to be touching, because as ink-colored flumes went higher, the rain dripped so thick, it streamed in black teardrops over the luminous surface of his opal dragon.

Dantanian had no need to conduct the circle of flame. No reason to perform when Dementors were his audience. He merely had to lift his hand, and the flame compressed and grew higher from itself, so tall it almost bent back in towards him. It looked ready to form a protective half-sphere, like a broken shell. But every Dementor in Azkaban had already become nothing but an impotent shadow behind his fire.

He walked along the stone wall, looking back now and then to admire his work. He read out each number as he passed, looking progressively more impatient. Part of him looked unable to believe this was this easy. And it *had* taken him frighteningly little effort for him take command of Azkaban.

"460," he read, voice louder with each one, "461," until he pronounced the three numbers he had come for. "462." The door looked a painting-like cerulean blue, from the flames behind. "Neil Palmer. With my luck, he's dead."

Dantanian waved his wand, and the door made a creaking sound but didn't budge. He sighed, seeming to lose any last vestige of patience, and called fire to his hand. He stepped back, then let the fireball grow whiter and thicker in his palm, packing in like a snowball. Then he flung it at the lock.

When it still did not budge, he cried out in frustration, clenching his fists. A great gust of fire, taller than the fire wall, erupted and flung the stone door off its hinges.

Dantanian walked over it, and pulled down his hood, as he walked into cell 462.

It was not clear whether the man inside was alive or dead. Azkaban had whittled him down harshly, for only a bit more than a decade or so under its hospitality. This was what it did to the truly weak ones. He was an emaciated skeleton, tattered rags marked with the number 462. When Dantanian called, "Palmer," his head lifted, but his open eyes did not seem to see.

If Dantanian had seen Palmer on his last visit, perhaps the lies about thinking him already punished enough might have been closer to true.

"What?" Palmer croaked, voice husky from disuse. He sat up on the meager straw he had for a bed.

"On your feet," Dantanian barked. When Palmer didn't obey, he waved his wand and sent Palmer rolling across cold stone, into a puddle of water let through from the storm. Palmer was still half-asleep, but shied back when he felt the cold of the rain. He recoiled further when he saw the blackness on his fleshless hands.

"Who are you?"

Dantanian raised his wand higher. Palmer folded his arms in front of his head as he cringed back, and made the great struggle to pull himself to his feet.

"How can you ask me that?" Dantanian spat, eyes huge and swollen already. It was impossible to distinguish the fall of tears from the beating of rain outside, which he made no effort to protect against.

Palmer didn't seem to dare go closer. "You aren't dressed like a guard. And you don't look like one."

"I look like *someone*, though," Dantanian said ferociously. "Don't I." He undid his braid, leaving it a mass of curls around his face, wet and dark as the smoke of Dementors dying. "DON'T I?"

"I think... I think- wait-"

"Don't you even remember her?" Dantanian yelled, voice breaking.

Palmer stumbled backwards, until he hit the wall of his cell. It looked to be the only thing keeping him up. "You look like- the girl. The girl I killed. Astarte. Astarte Noir."

"So you don't deny it." Dantanian's knuckles turned to white around his wand. "I wouldn't have believed you if you tried."

"Are you..." Palmer seemed to be counting mentally, a process that took very long. "You'd... you'd be the age, wouldn't you? Her son."

"Tell me why you killed her!" The words seemed to rip out of his lips, before any more considered or planned interrogation could. "Why? Why *her*? Tell me why you raped and killed my mother!"

"I let you live!" Palmer began to laugh, clutching at his stomach like he had not laughed in years. "I let you live. And this is my reward. Of course. Of course this is my reward. And I suppose it is, isn't it? It is. It is a reward..."

"What do you mean, you let me live?" Dantanian jammed his wand right against that awful deathly face.

"I was meant to kill you both, but she fought. I didn't think she'd fight like that. She kept saying your name. Begging for her son. *Dantanian, Dantanian, Dantanian*. Do what you

want to me, but don't hurt Dantanian. Let him live, he doesn't know who we are, he doesn't know about our blood. He just thinks his name is Dante. Dantanian, Dantanian..." Memory seemed not as gratifying to him as it might have been, for a more enthusiastic killer. "So eventually I gave in, and promised her I'd let you live."

"That's why." Dantanian looked like he was the prisoner then, so young and destroyed. "That's why she died smiling." Palmer nodded grimly, looking between Dantanian and his wand. His were not the eyes of someone considering some desperate lunge, though, some final attempt to survive this confrontation. Rather, he looked to be wondering how long it would take before Dantanian killed him.

"And you kept your word? Why? Was there some magic to it? Some unbreakable vow?"

"No, no. I didn't *want* to kill you. I didn't want to kill her either, but-"

"But you did. You and just you." Palmer nodded to every one of Dantanian's statements. "You were the only intruder. It was like it said in the papers. You got her wand, took her downstairs, murdered her, violated her- you disfigured her body-"

"I had to do that," Palmer insisted, looking truly guilty. "I knew the Muggles would find her first, and they took you away before the wizards knew one of their own was dead. So I thought the wizards would see all those- those blood and bones- and think her son's body must be part of that pile. I didn't- I killed her the quickest way I knew. I didn't hurt her at all, until- after."

"But you're a pervert. A lunatic. You raped her, because you do that to women. You did it to some Muggle girl-"

"Eloise Bourbeau," Palmer said, showing a first hint of spine. "Her name was Eloise Bourbeau. She was not just *some girl*. She was special. I *loved* her. I regretted what I did. I didn't plan it, and I wished I hadn't done it after. I never wanted to hurt her." He was pleading far more energetically, for Dantanian to believe in this love for a different woman, than he likely would for his own life. "That's why I erased her memory. So she wouldn't have that pain anymore."

"I suppose you'll claim you loved my mother too."

"No," Palmer leaned his head back against the wall, like a corpse in final repose. "Eloise is dead- the paper said, a year ago, she's dead and no one can hurt her- but it doesn't matter, it's no use still, no one will believe me- you won't believe me, I killed your mother-"

"Tell me why you killed my mother *now*, or I will feed you to a hundred Dementors."

"No!" Palmer gasped. "Not Dementors! Not their kiss! Kill me if you want, any way you want, please kill me, but not that-"

Dantanian rolled his eyes at the man begging for his soul, and Palmer began to spill out from the mouth, everything all at once. "I was forced to. Not Imperius, but threats. A man told me he knew about Eloise and what I had done to her. He said he knew I loved her, and he would

hurt her if I didn't do just as he said. He told me to kill Astarte and Dantanian Noir, told me everything about you. He said if I didn't, he would kill Eloise- so I did it. I knew he *could* kill her, or someone else he got to do the job. He said that I would go to the British authorities, turn myself in, and confess what I had done to Eloise, and make it seem the same with Mademoiselle Noir. It would be like I had become obsessed with another beautiful dark-haired woman in Paris, and stalked her, and violated her. But because she fought, I killed her this time, and her son with her. He said- he said I *had* to rape her so they would believe it. Even though I didn't want to."

"So none of it was your fault, in this version."

"No, but, I just- I didn't have anyone to go to who I thought *could* stop him. The choice was between Eloise, and the life of a woman and child I didn't know. A woman he said was an evil bitch, and her child an abomination. There'd be life for me in Azkaban, but he promised I wouldn't get the Kiss, he promised, I'm not supposed to get the Kiss for it, that's the one thing he promised. For Eloise's life. He promised he would not hurt Eloise, that he'd let her live her life with Muggles happy and undisturbed- that she would die a natural death, never knowing what her stalker had done to her. As long as I stayed in Azkaban with my mouth shut.

"I made the trade. It was mad, but I loved her. I'd failed her once, out of my own weakness. I wasn't going to fail her again. I told myself I was already a monster, already deserved to die, so I could suffer terrible things- I could do terrible things, anything if it was for her.

"The man who wanted her dead knew it too. He knew me from school, we were at Hogwarts in the same year, though I was in Hufflepuff. He didn't speak to me much, as a Hufflepuff Muggleborn. But before he sent me, he told me he knew I was the man for the job because I was an honest man, and I would go to any lengths for the woman I loved. And I did. That's all."

"The man's name," Dantanian said, and perhaps he should have already guessed. Perhaps it was obvious already. But he looked as shocked as the grave, at the name that came out of Neil Palmer's lips.

"Phineas Nigellus Black."

"No. No! That's not possible! You're lying! You're lying!"

"What would be the point? You're going to kill me regardless. If I wanted to stitch up some innocent man, I wouldn't say one of your family. Do you know him? He was..." Palmer looked away. "I've read he's headmaster of Hogwarts now. But- he was not a good man."

"Why?" Dantanian demanded, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him. Palmer swayed limply back in forth in Dantanian's grasp. "Why would he make you do that? Why?"

Palmer blinked. "You and your mother," he said tiredly, "Were a taint upon his bloodline. He said House Black's strength came from its purity of blood, and he had always lived by that. He said..."

Palmer strained to remember. "He said he had let your mother live as long as she knew her place. But she had come to his son's christening. His first son. Like that witch in Sleeping Beauty, I said, but he didn't know the fairy tale. He said she had come to pay her respects, as the child's aunt, and it was all he could do to keep his wife and all his family from seeing her. He said she demanded that he acknowledge her son Dantanian alongside his own. She threatened to expose the truth about his father to the world, if he named this boy as heir and left her son out in the cold, in exile, far away. She said it wasn't right. She gave him an ultimatum, so he sent her away, and then he sent for me- you don't believe me, do you?"

"No," Dantanian gasped, "No, I do. I think I do. Legilimens!" Palmer seemed to mount no resistance to the intrusion, because Dantanian took little time to see what he wanted.

He let go of Palmer, buried his face in his hands, and began to sob.

Palmer sat on the ground watching him cry, back battered all the while by unrelenting rain.

"The Hat was right," Dantanian said finally, words inane out of context, looking up with swollen but focused eyes. "I betrayed her. *I* betrayed my mother."

"I'm sorry," Palmer said, and almost seemed to wish he could comfort Dantanian.

Dantanian lifted his wand. "Crucio," he cast without feeling or enthusiasm, but it was enough to send Palmer screaming and jolting. Dantanian waited, pulling his wet hair back, then pulling up his knees to his chest and resting his chin on them. He looked heartbreakingly young, like some helpless beautiful bystander, as he watched the man he was torturing.

"That's enough," Dantanian said tiredly, voice a whimper, and prodded at Palmer with his boot. "So. How do you want to die? I take it quick, not slow."

Palmer's looked as happy as any human could be. "You're going to kill me! You won't give me to the Dementors?"

"No," Dantanian said, swallowing back another sob, "Because you told me the truth."

"Quick," said Palmer, almost eager.

"I know plenty of ways to kill someone, but I've never tried the Killing Curse. I think that would be fastest, though."

Palmer sat back against the wall, obediently closing his eyes.

"Avada Kedavra," Dantanian said, voice a whisper. The green light flashed out and struck Neil Palmer dead.

When Phineas Apparated outside Dantanian's rooms, Dantanian waiting at the door. He had on black everything, robes, cloak, gloves, boots, and hood, though Phineas pushed Dantanian's hood back to kiss him. Dantanian turned his face away.

"What?" Phineas said, looking bizarrely hurt. "What's wrong, Dante?"

"Not yet," Dantanian said, with an awful smile on his lips. "I told you, I've got a surprise for you."

The night was clear and must have been warm, since Phineas went without a cloak, clear enough to see any number of stars above the ocean. Phineas did not seem to suspect anything, not for the entire walk towards the observatory. "Did you finally get that room in there open?" he asked, and Dantanian didn't answer. That just made Phineas watch him more admiringly, eyes following the lines of Dantanian's body under his robes. He only stopped looking at Dantanian when he heard the strangled voices of his children.

His eldest son Sirius bore a striking resemblance to his father, though he was barely a teenager, perhaps on the verge of attending Hogwarts. He was bound at the mouth, ankles, and chest, arms secured behind his back not in rope but strands of blue fire. Also bound with him were the younger Phineas, a child of about seven, the still-younger Arcturus, only five, and a young infant on the ground in black swaddling cloth, with the same pale skin and curling dark hair. He seemed, despite the fire rope around him, to be sleeping.

"Sirius!" Phineas gasped, turning to Dantanian in alarm. "Finn! Arcturus! *Cygnus*! My sons!"

"I know. I thought it would be harder than it turned out to be, to collect them."

"Dante?"

Dantanian gave him a look of pure and unconcealed hatred. "Expelliarmus."

Phineas's wand flew to him. "Really?" he said after, looking almost disappointed as he pocketed it. "I expected *some* kind of fight, at least from you. But none of you gave me one. This *is* a bloodline that deserves to die."

"Dante, is that *you*?" Phineas gasped, and with a wave of his wand, Dantanian sent him falling to his knees.

"There's a saying in the Muggle Bible," Dantanian said, the waning moon haloing him like an angel. He still looked like one- like he always did, even when torturing or killing.

"An eye for an eye. Revenge in kind. These are your legitimate heirs, who the law says will take over House Black when you die. They're what matters most to you. I would have brought Belvina too, but you never mention her. Nor do I enjoy hurting women- well, most women. And *she* can't be an heir."

"What do you mean, revenge? Dante, did *you* bring my sons here? Did you bind them like that? Let them go!"

"I'm not going to follow your orders," Dantanian said softly, "Ever again." Then he strode towards the Black children, laughing. The sound cut the night like a razor. "What do you think, Finn?" Both father and son looked up at the name. "Should I tell them who I am? Should I tell them who their father is, before I pick who dies?"

Phineas looked around, likely for some kind of weapon. "You've gone mad."

"No," Dantanian said, and turned to the boys he'd bound. "Not all of you will be old enough to understand this. Cygnus definitely won't. But you have the right to know, that *I* am the rightful heir to House Black."

"By what right?" Phineas growled.

"Power," said Dantanian.

Strangled noises came from the boys, most of all Sirius. Phineas tried to grab Dantanian, who sent him to the ground with a lazy Flipendo. "My grandmother prophesized it so. She was a pyromancer. So am I. Even if I cannot see the future. But I saw the past, Finn. I know what you did. See, I know this is... not the *optimal* way, for me to introduce myself to my cousins. And yet we're all here, boys, when I'm sure you'd rather be snug in your soft beds, for one reason. Your father had my mother killed."

"No!" Phineas yelled, so violently anyone could have heard his guilt. "What are you talking about? Who poured these lies into your ear-"

"Neil Palmer."

Phineas sunk back to his knees of his own accord. "You got into Azkaban. You never stopped trying, even when you said you did. You spoke to *Neil Palmer*."

"Here," Dantanian said curtly, "Is what you need to know." He looked down at the boys with disdain at their weakness. They seemed mere extensions of Phineas to him. "My name is Dantanian Noir. My mother's name was Astarte Noir. She was a painter. She was perfect. Phineas Nigellus Black had her killed." Phineas didn't bother trying to object. Even the muted sounds from the boys were softer. "He took her from me. I had no one else. So, an eye for an eye. I'm going to take from Phineas Black what he loves most in the worst way I know."

"It isn't true!" Phineas yelled with a burst of courage. "It isn't! Palmer was always a liar! Do you think I would entrust a murder to a *Hufflepuff*?"

"Are you curious *how* I spoke to him? How I finally got into Azkaban? I'll show you. Protego Diabolica!" Blue flames burst out again, coming to encircle Phineas with one smooth wave. They did not raise high, only flickering around his ankles. Phineas's sons made sounds of distress like they were watching their father die, loud enough to wake the infant. He might have cried, if his mouth had not been full of fire.

"This is a spell of my own creation. I invented it as a shield against Dementors. A Patronus of fire. But it should shield against humans too- some humans, that is. It will allow most to pass through, unharmed. Every Dementor is my enemy. But not every person. The only person the flames will hurt is someone who is my enemy."

Phineas's legs shook where he stood. "What- what will it do, to your enemies?"

"It will kill. But no, go ahead. If you're telling the truth, if you're not my enemy, then step through the fire, and it won't touch you."

Dantanian waited, and waited, longer than anyone needed, to see Phineas was not going to walk forward. They stared at each other, through the mist and ethereal flicker of blue flame. Then Dantanian waved his wand, and the ring of fire disappeared.

"See, boys? Your father *is* my enemy."

He did not leave Phineas free long. A razor-thin whip with the brilliance of fire curled out from his wand, encircling Phineas and driving him to kneel. He was soon bound like his sons, except for the gags. Dantanian dragged Phineas by the end of the fire rope to right before his sons, facing them.

"What are you planning to do?" Phineas said with false bravado. "You have to know you'll never get away with this, bastard-"

Dantanian backhanded Phineas across the face. His struck face hit the courtyard hard, a smashing sound that echoed. His sons cried out and tried to inch closer. They stopped when they saw Dantanian's wand raise again.

"I don't actually know if this *will* work. You'll have to bear with me. I mean, it works in theory. And I think it worked on the animals I tried, but it's hard to judge. So this is multi-purpose." He adjusted the dragon pendant around his neck. "I avenge my mother and claim my rightful place as the head of this house. And more importantly, I further my research."

"Don't," Phineas gasped. "Don't hurt them. Please, Dante, please don't hurt them-"

"You're lucky I even gave you a chance to *beg*." Dantanian kicked Phineas's face into the ground again. "I was older than some of your boys, but younger than some, when you ordered me dead along with my mother. You must have thought you succeeded, until I told you who I was. Why didn't you try and kill me then and wipe your bloodline clean? *Toujours pur*?"

Phineas's bloody face stared with bleak black eyes. "You know why."

"Yes," Dantanian said with a shudder of revulsion. "I suppose I do. Now tell me who you wish to spare."

"What?"

"Name one of your sons and I'll spare them. The others die. You pick who gets to live, at least for now. Unless you waste time. Then I'll just pick for you."

The boys began to shriek under their gags. Phineas leaned against his older brother, seeming to weep. Dantanian was looking at their father.

"You are mad. How can you make me-"

"I'll count down from ten, and then I'll make the choice for you. Ten..."

Phineas breathed out hard and squirmed, testing his bonds fruitlessly.

"Nine. Eight. Seven..."

The boys tried to inch away on their knees. Dantanian pulled them back each time with a flick of his wand.

"Six. Five. Four..."

"Please, Dante, I'll do anything! What do you want? Money? Or- House Black- I'll acknowledge you, I'll name you my heir-"

"Three, two-"

"PHINEAS!"

The boys fell silent.

"Your namesake? I suppose narcissism from you should always be predictable."

Sirius wrenched himself violently away from the junior Phineas, eyes hateful. He seemed to have expected to be the one chosen to save.

"It's not that," Phineas said bleakly. "I'm sorry, Sirius. But your brother is more clever. He would make a better heir."

"He would have," Dantanian agreed, and hauled Phineas the younger forward between the line of sons and their father.

"What are you doing? I picked him to save-"

"Didn't you expect me to switch it?" Dantanian said, looking more surprised by Phineas's surprise than anything. "Of course I would do this first, to the one you least want to lose."

Dantanian's pockets were full of moonstones, like the ones in the room with the Mirror of Erised, and his secret hoard. He cast Locomotor mortis on each Black male in turn, and then lay the stones in a circle around young Phineas's kneeling body, eight in total. Phineas the elder raged and pleaded and threatened all the while. Finally, Dantanian finished, and stood over the boy, raising his wand with an unchangeable resolution in his beautiful dark eyes.

"Whatever you mean to do to him," Phineas said bravely, "Do it to me instead."

"You," Dantanian hissed, anger coming at once. "You! You had my mother killed, and then you did what you did with *me*? You made me a traitor to her! A traitor! I won't do as you say ever again!"

He made the rope around Phineas gag him too finally. Then both the moonstones on the ground and the charm on his pendant glowed, blue and silver.

"Hallow," Dantanian said, and one of the moonstones cracked. Both the bound forms called Phineas jerked away from it, but they could not escape the black smoke that exploded from inside it.

"Wand," Dantanian said, and another moonstone cracked, a loud smashing sound in the air before a whoosh of smoke.

"Stone. Cloak." With each word, another stone burst, following a swift circle around Phineas's body. "Mirror. Desire. Eurydice." Then Dantanian looked up at the sky, and pronounced the word that made the final stone break.

"Eclipse."

The moon went out of the sky. It was there, waning but bright, and then it was gone, as out of sight as if it had never been at all. Moonlight poured down from high above, a searing flood that crashed down upon Phineas the child, like it was all the moonlight in the world, concentrated to a single strike. The ground beneath trembled, but the impact seemed felt only by the child, who was screaming without being heard, and then fell silent.

Slowly, like the stones, the moonlight turned to black smoke. The boy tried to shy back, but he could not escape its hissing touch. Whether it reached turned black, smell filling the air of rot and decay like months of decomposition at once. It touched the boy's face and it collapsed upon itself, black and then grey, scaled and skeletal and inhuman.

It was too thin at first for the ropes to hold it. Dantanian let the smoke sweep them away. Then it would have been too tall, as what had once been Phineas Pollux Black rose from the ground, robes turning plain and lengthening, somber as a shroud but perfect pitch-black. That color would fade and tatter in time. At the moment, it was another eclipse. But it was a mercy, as it hid the rotted thing inside the robes from view.

Not enough to conceal what it was. That much was clear from the cold that filled the air. Once the black smoke dissipated, all that was left was an icy mist, spreading from the tall form hooded in black.

Dantanian examined his work. "Well, it *looks* like a Dementor."

The two younger sons seemed to have fainted. Phineas was staring in horror at his once-namesake, who floated in his direction with a newborn hunger.

"Dementor!" Dantanian barked, and the Dementor froze. "Stop it." He waved his hand imperiously, and the Dementor moved aside mechanically, as ordered. Dantanian seemed to have a puppeteer's control of the creature.

"It has a Dementor's hunger," Dantanian observed, and let the gag fall from the Phineas Black that remained.

"What! What? What did you do? Salazar- no, what did you do, no," Phineas babbled.

Dantanian looked dissatisfied even as tears began to stream down Phineas's face too. "It's not enough," he said to himself fretfully. "Should I feed him to his son? Would that be enough? Should I change them all first? I don't even know if that would be enough. An eye for an eye. An eye for an eye. Let your sons take your soul? HOW IS THAT ENOUGH FOR MY MOTHER?"

Dantanian's roar echoed through the empty courtyard. No one moved.

Then he took Phineas's wand out of his pocket and snapped it. The loss didn't even seem to register on Phineas's stunned, hopeless face.

"Hogwarts," Dantanian said, like his mind was already made up. "You love Hogwarts. I'll take that too."

"What?"

Phineas did not seem even relieved, when Dantanian laughed and told him, "I'm letting you live. All of you. Even this one, if you can call it a life." He gestured to the Dementor. "There's no reversing it. It's how the first ever Dementors were made. But you can try." He began to pace between his captives, speaking fast and manic. "I'll burn Hogwarts to the ground and make you watch, Finn. I'll kill your wife and every one of your children and make you watch. I *am* the heir to this house. The last ever heir to House Black. You will watch me burn this house to the last of the embers before I am merciful enough to let you die."

Dantanian looked up at the moon, which had at some point reappeared, then back down. He waved his wand and the ropes untangled from the Blacks. Phineas was sobbing and trembling.

"I swear it by the goddess Hecate," Dantanian said, voice ringing clear and true. "I will not rest until this tainted blood is gone from the earth. I will be the end of House Black."

The vision of nightmare faded, into Lamia Periander's honest sweet face in sunlight. She was stood on the edge of white cliffs once again.

"Daniel!" she exclaimed, and flung herself on him, hugging him with everything she had.

When she pulled back, Dantanian was not smiling. "You look different, Lamia. More- I don't know, delicate."

It was true. Her dark hair was longer, and her face more slender, its bones looking somehow closer to the surface. Nor did her shoulders look noticeably broader than Dantanian's anymore.

Lamia shrugged uncomfortably. She was dressed like a Hogwarts professor, which added to the impression she was becoming someone else. Dantanian was himself, in velvet of black and gray. "It's nothing. I think I've just- lost weight. It's hard work apprenticing under Professor Nott. You don't get any rest-"

"You never told me why you took that apprenticeship, instead of studying to be an assessor with your father."

Lamia was clearly lying as she told him, "It's just a precaution, but I want to do research. Potions and anything else, and Hogwarts is the best place for it. Research on my family's curse. I- everything's fine, nothing's changed, I'm sure the ritual from my birth will hold, I just- I just need to make sure."

Dantanian stepped forward and hugged her, pressing his face into her hair. When he parted, she could tell he was already planning to go. "I took your Portkey and came all this way-"

"I told you I couldn't stay long. I brought you here to make sure you would remember where I kept the moonstones. If anything happens to me, they're yours. And I've left you something else there too. Something that..." He looked down. "I haven't had any use of it. Believe me, I tried. You don't know how I've tried. But I don't think it could- and maybe it could help you. With your curse. Maybe it could help hold your change back, or stop it- I don't really understand what it does, but even just as an outside chance-"

"Daniel, you're scaring me." Lamia held onto his sleeve tightly. She even looked shorter, and ten times more fragile.

"It would be better," Dantanian said, stroking her hand, "If you don't go back to Hogwarts. I'll let you know, when the time comes to leave it. And you shouldn't keep the mirror there either."

"Do you have to go so quickly? You can't even explain?"

"I'm sorry." Dantanian sounded to mean it. He hugged her yet again, as if fortifying himself with her warmth, or the memory of it. "I'm grateful to you, Lamia Periander. You're the only true friend I've ever had. Except for my mother. Just her and you."

"Don't talk like we'll never see each other again," Lamia said, old command coming back to her softened voice. "We will, won't we?"

"I hope we will," Dantanian said, without hope in his voice.

When he let her go, his hands came away from her hair. There was a feather in them. It was grey.

"Where are you going?"

"New Zealand," said Dantanian, and disappeared.

"Daniel, I don't get it," said Dorian, bringing a glass. Dantanian didn't take it, sat back in a plush chair, in what was unmistakably Malfoy Manor. In time, this room would become Narcissa Malfoy's parlor.

Dantanian was dressed as he had been with Lamia, while Dorian was a positive vision, grown at what might be around twenty to something truly magnificent, resplendent in jade and silver. His body looked as whip-tight and inviting as it ever had- more so, but Dantanian was not looking at it. Nor even at Dorian's face very much.

"New Zealand? And that job? You didn't even take Care of Magical Creatures." Dorian marveled. "You actually went and asked the Ravenclaw Head of House if it was possible to take *no* electives."

There was humor in Dorian's voice, but Dantanian had the same furtive hunted air as with Lamia. "I told you, I can't be here much time. Listen, I've left something that I want you to keep safe. It's in your hall. It's very large. You might want to take it somewhere the house elves can't see it. It will frighten them."

"What is it?" Dorian sounded naive still.

"You'll see," said Dantanian, and rose to his feet. "If you're confused, contact Lamia Periander. I can't stay any longer."

"Wait!" Dorian exclaimed, seizing his hand before he could walk out. "Daniel, I haven't seen you in almost a year! And you're just going to disappear again?"

"I'm not going to disappear," Dantanian said humorlessly. "I'm going to New Zealand."

"Did something- happen?" The levity fell from Dorian's face too. "Something bad? Daniel- what *happened* to you?"

"Don't call me that!" Dantanian wrenched himself from Dorian's touch. "That's not-"

Not my name, he did not say. Whatever revelations he had considered blurting out, they stayed with him, until the end.

"Call me Shaw," Dantanian said coldly. "And I'll call you Malfoy."

"Don't leave," Dorian blurted, "Please, Daniel, if you knew- if you had any idea what you mean to me-"

"If you had any idea," Dantanian countered, "Of the things I mean to do."

"To me?" Dorian said, arching his head playfully. The light from the chandeliers caught on his beautiful moonlight hair. Dantanian did stare then, and at Dorian's eyes for a moment, the silver sheen of them in the flamelight.

"Never and always my muse," he whispered to himself, too softly for Dorian to hear. Then he stepped away.

"Don't worry," he said impassively. "This isn't goodbye. You'll be seeing me soon. But if you don't, and Lamia needs me, then give her anything she needs, in my place. Promise me, Dorian. I'm sorry, but I have to ask for another favor. If I don't come back, promise me you'll help Lamia."

"I will. Ask anything of me. Anything, and I'll give it to you. Daniel, I lo-"

"Goodbye, Malfoy," said Dantanian, and disappeared before Dorian could finish the word.

Dantanian was still wearing the dragon pendant around his neck. It shone as the point which drew all light, on a vast green mountain slope, amidst a sea of silver dragons.

Dantanian climbed down a hill, with a short, average-looking brown-haired man by his side. "Thank you, Taylor," Dantanian said, "I think I can take it from here."

"It's not an easy thing," the man called Taylor said, in a New Zealand accent. "Picking your first one to get your start. Even with your credentials. I know you must think it beneath you, the trial period, raising one of our lot by hand, when you're trained a dozen Chinese Fireballs."

Neither Dantanian nor Taylor blinked at that statement, despite Dantanian's visible youth. The midday air had a pleasant, almost gilded haze around them. The sounds of dragontamers nearby, all in leather that matched theirs, was one of uncomplicated happiness. The Opaleyes, some dozens or even a hundred of them, all seemed well-cared for, and docile as could be.

"I don't." Dantanian gave Taylor a fake but beautiful smile. Taylor stumbled, foot almost catching in a divet, before he hastened to catch up to his new colleague. "I'm excited to pick her out." Dantanian stopped at the first dragon they found unattended, a gentle and lazy-looking little creature that didn't reach higher than his waist. "What about this one?"

"That's the one I wanted to show you," Taylor said proudly. "No name yet, but here's the sweetest of the bunch. Never snapped those pointy teeth at no one, not even once."

Dantanian bent to examine the Opaleye. The pendant swayed forward, brushing the dragon's growing scales, and it let out a happy little squeal, butting its little head against the moonstone. Both Dantanian and Taylor laughed.

"This one's adorable," Dantanian said with a real smile. "I get to name my dragon?" Taylor nodded placidly. "I'll call her Astarte. Astarte Noir."

"Astarte," Taylor repeated. "That ain't a name you hear every day."

"It's the name of a goddess," Dantanian said, dark eyes already going distant. "It's written sometimes as Ishtar, or Ashtoreth."

Taylor nodded equably, turning to go, before seeming to remember something. "Wait. That's no good. I'm sorry, but this one's not a girl. If you look, your little goddess having a good old time with your necklace there isn't so much goddess, as god or little prince."

"Or angel," Dantanian said, and watched the dragon swish his tail at the necklace, all thoughtless, exuberant innocence. "I still like this one. I'll just call it- there's a male form of Astarte."

Taylor nodded. Once he had gone, Dantanian took back his necklace, and knelt before the Opaleye.

"Your name," Dantanian told the dragon, "Is Astaroth."

The Gravedigger's Daughter

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Printing this and/or binding it for individual use is totally fine! Sending hugs and affection to all readers! <3 Enjoy :)

Playlist

"So *why* did you think that would break me exactly?"

Draco raised his head, automatically glowering again. Severus was in one of his comfortable armchairs, writing feverishly with quill on parchment. He put it aside when he saw Draco finished. He had perhaps never looked more pale and sallow and unlikely to live very much longer.

"Oh, don't let me interrupt. Far be it from me to interrupt the penning of your memoirs. Is that another purpose, to your newfound intimacy with your predecessor? Literary consultation?"

"This is for you. There is much you need to know, to understand what you have seen. I will also give you the books I have kept." *Read, that you haven't gone all Astaroth-on-New-Zealand on.* It would have alarmed Draco, that lack of self-defensive spikiness, if it had been someone else poking the snake. It still alarmed a part of him he didn't seem able to turn off.

"I know everything you do about what Astaroth did," Draco said defensively. "And Grindelwald's part in making the talon wand. What did you think was so weak about me that I couldn't handle the knowledge of my- connection or something to someone so-"

He didn't know the words for Dantanian Noir. He had thought those anomalous words just a designation for mysterious castle-builder Dantanian Black, or else a code for a person possessed by pure and unadulterated evil. The man whose memories Severus had gone to so much trouble to hide from Draco, he seemed to be something else entirely. Which was in its own way more frightening. But Draco would be damned if he would show it hurt him. Whether or not Severus had been in any way right to keep this from him, Draco would *not* let him see him squirm.

"You followed," Severus said tiredly, "Much of the same initial research I did, writing to Taylor's descendants in New Zealand, and to Ollivander. With these memories, though, I was able to go further in unraveling the mystery of the talon wand, and then further yet with the books at the citadel. Listen to what I have uncovered, and then make your judgment. I know that is coming."

The idea of Severus being under Draco's condemning judgment seemed surreal, and yet it felt that way. "Go on. Tell me, and tell me now, and maybe I'll care to speak to you again for whatever remains of our inconsequential lives."

It was a jab at Severus, really, but Severus took it seriously. "Not inconsequential, Draco, and therein perhaps lies my fear. You will not believe me, but when I started my research, I intended to share the vial and everything I learned with you. I merely wanted to know as whole a truth as I could beforehand, so you would not torment yourself with incomplete theories, or take any rash action in attempting to fill in the memories' gaps."

Draco crossed his arms. "There's one big gap. It's what did happen to make Astaroth go mad. I take it Dantanian was behind it. Do you think Astaroth *ate* him, along with all the rest? It makes sense there'd be no memory of him being dragon chow, but-" Then he stopped. "If Dantanian was ingested, and there were years of decomposition... what, do you think some part of him is physically *inside* this wand? Unless he turned into or melded with Astaroth..." He laid the talon wand on Severus's table, and stared at it, thinking, *Your secrets are out, Dantanian, you might as well unveil yourself now.*

"I can only speculate," Severus said unhappily, "But I deduced much from evaluating the memories from a perspective of incentives. Dantanian may have chosen them in a rush, soon before whatever mad act he committed that made Astaroth change, or he may have chosen at leisure. But he meant them for Dorian Malfoy, and he meant them to communicate some certain things." He looked at Draco, and it was almost like they were having one-on-one extra Potions lessons again.

"He told Dorian before," Draco said haltingly, "That he needed him to keep whatever he gave him safe, and to look after the Periander girl if anything happened to her. So... he would have put in anything Dorian needed to know about the gift or Lamia Periander." Severus nodded. "And... Dorian spent all those years trying to guess Dantanian's secret. And he almost told him at the end, before he left. Maybe he regretted not saying, and wanted to show him."

"Whether or not Dantanian had feelings for the Malfoy boy," Severus said briskly, "And whatever their nature, it seems that the memories attempted to do so, yes- and to show Dorian the nature of *their* relationship, and some insight how Dantanian may *have* cared for him. They paint an autobiography in fragments. And an outline of Phineas Black's crimes. He may have wanted those not to remain unpunished, should he not have the chance to follow through with his vow of revenge."

"But they did," Draco said, a bile coming to his throat different from that for Severus, however personal that betrayal. "He lived a long life, didn't he? There's a painting of him in Dumbledore's office."

"Indeed," Severus said, rubbing his eyes. "I believe he relays messages between the headmaster and your uncles for the Order." He held up a hand to forestall Draco's expression of outrage. "The point is, I believe he had one other purpose. To make obvious what he was about to *do*. If we take that for granted, we can assume most or all of the keys to understanding what he did are inside these memories, and we need not look elsewhere."

Severus waited for him, then seemed to see Draco would not deduce it so quickly. Absurdly, Draco felt a pang of shame for not being clever enough in front of his godfather. "What did he do?"

"I cannot be certain," Severus intoned, "But after more than a year of research and consideration, my belief is that he attempted to change the dragon into a Dementor." He smiled mirthlessly at Draco's involuntary gasp. "I do not know if he was mad to attempt such a thing, or merely overconfident. But if we make that assumption, and then reverse engineer his choice of memories, it makes a kind of sense. His childhood memories paint his mother and his bond with her, yes, but they also follow his early interest in dragons. The full ritual he does against Black's son is in the memory, along with some of the steps it seems he took, to be able to complete it. And..." Severus waited to be sure Draco was ready to absorb this. "He says two things that indicate this, on the night he makes that Dementor."

Draco wet his dry lips, although his throat was also parched and sore, suddenly sorer. "That he... that he experimented with the ritual on animals, before any humans. And had some success. So... he might have taken it further, and tried it on a magical creature, and he had an affinity for dragons..." Draco's hand reached reflexively to touch the dragon birthmark on his shoulder. He dropped it.

"Three things, actually," Severus sighed. "That is the first. The second is his complete control over the Dementor he made of young Phineas. The third is his vow that he would burn Hogwarts to the ground." Draco actually cried out then. "Am I mad to think so? Maybe he meant to convert more dragons and humans at the reserve, or maybe just take Astaroth. But he did tell his only two friends in the world to stay away from Hogwarts, and expect him back in England before too long."

"But..." Draco closed his eyes, trying to make sense of anything here. It should have been easier for him, if he had some kind of... bond, with Dantanian. "The ritual went wrong? Either he lost control of the- the dragon-Dementor, Astaroth- or it was some unnatural creature that never should have been made in the first place, like-" *Like Frankenstein's monster.* "You think that- eating everyone was like- like the Dementor's kiss? Some attempt, since the dragon couldn't wield the Dementor's power-"

"I am surprised in a way," Severus said mildly, "That Dantanian did not consider an impediment a dragon would have, that many other creatures would not, in successfully completing the office of Dementor. Dementors take their sustenance from souls. They feed on those, as if there is something incomplete in them, and they need to take from complete beings in some vain effort to restore themselves whole. I have been writing this for you," he said like a professor offering extra tutoring, "In my notes," and held them up. "The Dementor's Kiss is, of course, through the mouth. Perhaps the rest of the draining takes place ultimately through that opening as well. Whereas a dragon's mouth... is already occupied."

"They breath fire," Draco blurted. "So if the Dementor couldn't feed- if it was a- mad homunculus already- it *might* try to swallow its victims whole-"

"And still find itself," Severus finished, "As hungry as ever. But this is only *my* guess, put together without real evidence-"

"You're saying," Draco realized suddenly, taking a step away from the Pensieve and the talon wand, "That my wand's a fucking *Dementor*? An *incompetent* one?"

"You almost seem," Severus observed, "To find the second worst than the first."

Draco looked away, not wanting to see the wry fondness in those traitor's eyes. "So what, that's why I have these- aggressive urges, or whatever? There's always a Dementor on me, trying to feed from me? But- when I dueled Aunt Bella, she called out for Dantanian-"

"For that," Severus interrupted, "The solution is perhaps more evident, although I only learned it very recently, from materials at the citadel. And its discovery was why I ultimately made the choice to keep this all from you. But you might as well know the worst with the rest of it."

"The worst?" Draco laughed. "What could be worse than my wand having a *Dementor* in it?"

Severus closed his eyes, as if taking in this last moment with Draco before he thought something would irreparably change in him, and then handed him two books, with bookmarks already inside. Draco opened the first without waiting, and found, of all things, a storybook. This was *Tales of Beedle the Bard.* Mother had read it to him as a child. The story of the Hallows was in it. But somehow, Draco had never heard this story, near the back.

"This is," Severus sighed, "A very ancient first edition, as you may see from the disrepair. The tale you must read is one that was removed from subsequent prints. I know not why."

The Gravedigger's Daughter

In the days before magic, there were three daughters, born to a woman called Eros, and a man called Thanatos. Eros cared for the daughters, and Thanatos dug graves. They were humble people who cared not for any feud or quarrel, and thought to live peaceful together until the end of their days, surrounded by grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

But there was a high nobleman called Obitus, and he had been cruel to his wife, a common girl. They had only one child before the wife died, a stillborn son without a name. The wife had the child buried by Thanatos in his humble graveyard, before she too passed into the pale. But Obitus demanded the child be exhumed and taken to his castle, so he might bury the child with his great forebears whose legacy would have been his patrimony.

Obitus asked once, offering money, and Thanatos refused. Obitus asked twice, offering threats, and Thanatos refused. So Obitus came to the graveyard at night and went to dig up the corpse. Except his hands were soft and untested, from a life of luxury, and he could not succeed. So he took Thanatos from the bed of Eros, and took him to the graveyard, and when Thanatos refused a third time, Obitus slayed him with his great noble sword of steel.

The next gravedigger delivered Obitus the body of his son.

Obitus was a lord with the world at his feet. All Eros had was her three daughters. So she went to her daughters, and asked how she might find justice for their father. None had any answer, and so they grieved.

The bleak midwinter went on, but Eros could not forget her beloved. She would have gone to join him, had she not cared for her daughters. So she went once more to her beloved girls, to ask how she could carry on living without their father.

The first daughter, Sola, was a woman full-grown, beautiful and womanly and good. She told her mother to make a picture of their father and hang it in their house, so they might look at his image every day, even if it would not speak to them.

The second daughter, Estella, was a woman on the cusp of maturity, soft and slender and feeble. She told her mother to try and make some enchantment to travel back in time, that she might see their father once more and say goodbye, even if that would be the end.

But the third daughter, Luna, was but a small girl, always chattering and at her mother's heels. She was too young to understand her father was dead. She told her mother that she had been wrong to let the new gravedigger put their father in the ground, and that she should dig him back up so he could be with them again.

Eros went mad, and followed the words of the third daughter. She went and dug up her husband. But he did not laugh or smile or dance with her.

She found his body preserved well in the frozen ground, and the veins still full of dried blood. So she took a branch from the black walnut tree over the graveyard, and cut it short and made it hollow. She took the blood and mixed it with the snow from the grave, to make it run again, and poured the liquid inside the wood. This she brought back, to show her youngest daughter that she had heeded her words. She gave it to her as a relic of her father.

One morning, Obitus came to their door. He laughed as he asked for the hand of the eldest daughter, Sola, in matrimony, to replace the wife he had lost.

Eros told Obitus to have shame. Obitus laughed twice and said he would have her daughter instead.

Eros lowered her head. But Luna took out her father's relic and showed it to the nobleman. She told him her mother had brought back her father from the grave, and their father would protect them.

When Obitus laughed thrice, Luna held the relic tightly. She shouted Abracadabra. Those were the folk words for a magic spell in a fairytale, except she was too young to remember them exactly. So she said them as Avada Kedavra. There was a green light, and then the man was dead.

Such was the first true witch born.

Draco lowered the book, growing more impatient with his godfather. "Yeah, I can see why they took it out. Not the best example for children, telling them controlled magic came about because some little girl invented the Killing curse. But what the fuck does that have to do with-"

"The second book." It was a book by Dantanian Black, but this one was not about castle-building. It was called *Xaphan and Prometheus.* Despite the title, it seemed a sort of encyclopedia, or almanac, with a set of individual entries. The book's subtitle read *Ancient Knowledge of Ancient Men.*

Draco heaved a sigh, but opened it to the marked page. Severus had written his own annotations, and underlined them.

Coda (A copiates taeda)

The Gravedigger's Torch

The earliest known form of wands is the "coda", as the Romans called it. Interest must have been lengthy, for the name to mutate from "a copiates taeda" in early texts, to "copiataeda," "cotaeda", and finally the common "coda". (Musical term, "ending") If a coda is the "coreblood's last acts", the abbreviation makes slanted sense. Other names in English and Latin: *blood branch, kinsblood wood, coreblood branch, desecration anathema, anathamans, copiatamans, copiapactum,* (a bargain? for what?) *copiatanux* (importance of walnut)*,* and most interestingly, *primanathema.* (First anathema or first sin. Possibly connected to Abrahamic or pre-Abrahamic ideas of "original sin"?)

The tale of the third daughter is apocryphal. More likely is lengthy experimentation, to find a tool to wield wild magic. I see no reason to dispute the status as progenitor, given references throughout wizarding history predating the "wand". A "wand" is a coda with its original core replaced by less troublesome artifacts, first with blood and then heartstrings of magical creatures, and then still less intrusive vestiges like hairs, feathers, etc. Humans are technically magical creatures, but the use of human blood or flesh proved too capricious.

In summary, a *coda* is a wand-like magical amplification and focus weapon, used in the same manner as a wand, with largely the same spells possible. A wand has an inhuman core, and a coda has a human one. The coda requires special conditions to be "activated" and turned to anything but an embarrassing relic of corpse desecration.

The main condition is *kin connection* with the first wielder. This may be either by blood ties, or membership of the same magical family or "house". I incline to think a blood connection *would* be necessary. After the coda is turned to a wand-like instrument through a kinsman wielder, it is then usable by any magical individual, although it will exhibit stronger loyalty to its holder than any wand. Both of the strength of this bond and the magic possible with the

coda vary given one inarguable factor, and two contentious ones: the first being the strength of the giver of coreblood, and the second two uncertain and perhaps coexistent: literal closeness of blood connection, or personal affinity with the coreblood giver, or that giver's purposes.

Other major characteristics include a wood of black walnut, although this may be folk tradition, following the apocryphal tale. Solely liquid blood seems to have been the initial coreblood, again in correspondence with the tale, although flesh was soon included often as well. There have also been experiments with coreblood combined with other magical ingredients, such as creature heartstrings, particularly frequent in ancient times of what is now Korea. Still, there is no consensus as to viability or even nature of hybrids, save unusual volatility even for a coda.

The coda's greatest interest is not in itself, but in its absence. It seems to have been a more powerful instrument. Why did the first form of wand pass out of fashion worldwide, so completely that is a forgotten memory, and why are references to such a key discovery only *scattered* in ancient texts, to the point it may have been deliberately forgotten? I believe this rests in a final rumored condition for the coda: the blood feud. (Possible against one's own blood?)

As in the tale, the most famous codas had blood or flesh of a slain family member taken, a weapon forged in service of vengeance or feud- such as against another family, clan, or magical house. Many also included a formal blood feud, sworn by the coreblood giver before their death, (Dantanian against House Black?) or even the suicide of the giver, to allow a coda made fresh from their corpse. The creation of the coda was a semi-public affair that in itself declared feud. When the coda became unpopular, it was replaced by the less complicated pureblood tradition of the obsidian "black dagger" (see page 77.) (Author claims is named after House Black, not the color. Both common to House Black traditions?)

Even if a wand for these purposes was inherited by another, including one not of their blood, there may have been lingering aftereffects. With the initial wielder, or a member of blood kin, they may have been magnified. (Weakening effect over generations or not?) What is certain is that the possession of a coda is reputed to have driven many wielders mad. Many speak of hearing the voice and communicating with the coreblood giver, who did not exist as a ghost but a phantom presence within them, seeing through their eyes and speaking in their own head.

The giver and wielder seem to have existed in a dynamic relationship, one which could result in dispute, abandonment, or betrayal. Other holders document strange dreams and the periodic loss of control of the coda and its magical output; their own vision, hearing, sense of smell, and priorioception; and disorder conditions such as gaps in memory surrounding difficult events (dissociative and/or psychogenic fugue), unusual morality or a lack thereof (moral turpitude, "Machiavellianism"), a feeling of distance from oneself (depersonalization), and most amusingly, the periodic inability to recognize faces properly (prosopagnosia). The decline of the coda is understandable. (Does the Dark Lord know of such weapons?) It would be interesting to attempt a construction in current times, but I will leave fools' errands to someone with far less to lose.

"What," Draco breathed, letting the book fall from his hands. He had read the entry twice, and still didn't think he understood. "The talon wand- you don't even think it's a *wand*? You think it's- it's this- vengeance thing? From- what, Dantanian's blood in the dragon?"

Severus looked as though he wished Draco could bring some new point to convince him he was wrong. "Grindelwald had the wands made after years of decomposition. Astaroth likely consumed Dantanian. Dantanian *Black* mentions volatile hybrids, including heartstrings- and dragon heartstrings *are* popular, obviously..."

"You think Dantanian was trying to..."

"I *think*," Severus said, rubbing his eyes, "There was a reason Grindelwald could not use the wands he had made. Either the heartstring was too rotted to be an active ingredient, and only the trace of Dantanian's blood fuels the wand, or else it is a mixture. Either way, he would have needed Black blood to make any of the wands come to life. Which he would have known, if he had any *intent* of creating a coda. So he probably sought out a powerful dragon as a core, and ended up by accident making something else."

"But..." Draco was grasping at straws too. "Aunt Bella can't have been the first of House Black to walk into Ollivander's shop after that. There would have been others, closer in blood-"

"Affinity. Or... commonality of purpose."

Draco wanted to lean against Severus for reassurance, even as he wanted to cast curses worse than *Dantanian's* on him. "Aunt Bella looks kind of like his mother. She must have more before Azkaban. Maybe she was more like her inside, too, before- is *this* what drove her mad? Dantanian in her head? Because he never talked to *me.*" Severus looked skeptical. "He hasn't! I wish he had! She probably hasn't seen the Dorian vial, but she knows his name. And enough of his secrets that the name scared my *mother*. I wish I had known! Or is it that last part? *Vengeance?* Did Dantanian think *she* would be the one to destroy House Black? And then it turned out I'm a better *prospect*?"

"My godson. If you speak of physical resemblance, he must have had great affection for Dorian Malfoy, to leave him this. You look much like him, and you are the first member of houses Black *and* Malfoy born since the wand's creation. The first combination of his family's blood and Dorian Malfoy's- even if you are not either's direct descendent. *And* you are the rightful heir to House Black, which he so desired to be. There need be no darker reason."

Severus's voice rose as if trying to convince himself. "I do not believe Dantanian has *real* control or influence over you, the way he may have at one time over Bellatrix Lestrange. There are many superficial similarities between him and you, yes, but the only ones that seem surely through *his influence* are in your magic. Who you are as a person- I believe you were chosen by Dantanian *because* you had some likenesses in temperament, talent, and thought, and the potential to grow more- *not* that he has created them in you, or altered you. Do not take those similarities as consequence rather than causation, and think-"

"How many times did you say I was a completely different person after I got my wand?" Draco marveled at Severus's obvious lying, though of course he didn't know there was the pesky time-traveling issue, also to account for changes. But there was still- "How *can* I trust myself? *You're* mad, keeping this from me, with the risk to everyone around me! To everyone in House Black! Leaving me aside- Narcissa Malfoy. Bellatrix Lestrange. Sirius Black. Andromeda Tonks. Nymphadora Tonks. And if it's people who marry them, or that they adopt- Remus Lupin. Theodore Tonks. Lucius Malfoy. *Harry Potter.* I've only assaulted or tortured *five* out of the nine- five out of seven I've had *access* to, *six* of seven if you count Naufragiam- so no worries, *that's* fine- and look at me! I thought I started growing out my hair and cutting it this length to look like *you.* But it was just how Dantanian liked it, right? So I looked more like his *boyfriend*?"

"There's no knowing. I would advise you not to think further into-"

"I'm sure you have!" Draco started away from Severus. "How much time have you spent looking at me seeing him? Cataloguing similarities, trying to see if I'm myself and not him? I thought *I* came up with the idea for a blood-fire spell, but he must have put it in my head- that dream, it's so *obvious*, if you had just told me-"

"Blood-fire. Do you mean Dracosanguis? You have become more interested in spell creation, but-"

"I thought I wanted to be like you there too. But it's what *he* wanted to do, isn't it? His experiments? Merlin, the *magic*- Theo called me a *pyromancer*- I did Protego Diabolica on one of my first tries without *studying* it- who knows if he invented Verniculpa too- and the brand, Periander said he invented a spell to brand things, if that was Cauterizo- *Sirius* has that brand. What did I do- what did *Dantanian* do to Sirius- no, shut *up,* Severus, I'm thinking. He tried not to make friends when *he* first got to Hogwarts, he couldn't stand being around people, but he made friends with one brainy girl- Hermione- who was one outcast Ravenclaw, from a strange pureblood family, *Luna*- I never wanted be friends with that kind of person before- before- do I even actually give a *shit* about Hermione or Luna, or is it just *Dantanian*, being reminded of his only fucking *friend*-"

"This is what I feared," Severus said, as Draco began to cry.

"Who *am* I?"

Draco buried his face in his hands. *How much did I change from the blue loop? Is it actually all just* one *change? That I looked for a wand before I should have, and* Dantanian *found me? Did* I *change at* all? His mind couldn't stop finding awful similarities.

"I stopped caring about blood purity! I've been doing secret experiments and dark rituals for *years*- I left home after fifth year to live with other family, a *Black*- my first time fucking someone was a *Potter*- and I'm self-centered and sarcastic and cruel! *Vain boy.* I tortured people and liked it. My own family, the people who raised me- like his grandparents- except maybe that's just him having it in for House Black, and he already started- Father, Mother, I just hurt and mutilated, but I tried to cast Sectumsempra on Aunt Bella- fuck, I tried to cast that on *Sirius*-"

"*What*?"

"I *am* a great candidate for last heir of House Black. That's why he chose me! Because Aunt Bella, she's on our family's side, but me- he's going to have me kill all of us, isn't he? The dragon and the fucking stag! No- Trelawney, the stag-"

"You're not making sense. Take some of your draught of peace-"

"Why should I trust something YOU brewed!" Draco flung all his Potions vials at Severus, as hard as he could. Severus dodged, and they smashed against the wall, a swift blue fall. "Why should I ever listen to another word you say? It's not even the first time you've betrayed me! Alligator! *Alligator!* He did this! You! Do you have any idea the things I would have done differently, if I had known the truth about me-"

"Any similarities you have with Dantanian are far outweighed by differences. I have, as you said, had ample time to compare. As a start, you relate completely differently to people. He pulled away from normal life, ignoring his classes and grades, while you worked hard and received all your OWLS, and all *Os.* Dantanian remained an outcast. You are surrounded by friends, people who care about you. You are kind to them, Draco, you look after so many, you try so hard to protect people, more than just destroy them. You *could* never have done the things Dantanian did-"

"YOU DON'T KNOW THE THINGS I WOULD DO!"

A phantom pulse of the Dark Mark on his wrist. It wasn't there and yet it was. It would always be there, no matter he fooled himself, thinking he had forgotten, or he was somehow redeemed. He would never not be the person who had taken the Mark, who let Death Eaters into Hogwarts, who set up Albus Dumbledore's death and was too much of a coward to finish it- who tortured at Voldemort's command- who led Vince to his death by Fiendfyre- who was only saved from Azkaban by Harry Potter's mercy- the person Harry *did* hate, when he knew Draco's first and *real* choices, without *Dantanian* in play-

"Is that a threat?"

"I wouldn't have killed Cantankerous Nott, if I had known." Draco regained his composure enough to hold back his tears, "I would have done *something* differently- I wouldn't have burned off my father's hand- wouldn't have let Sirius and Remus adopt me- wouldn't have let them adopt *Harry* into House Black- wouldn't have let my friends become dependent on a monster-"

"Don't call yourself that. You know not how it pains me to hear that. It is not *true.* And- the things you said to me, the night when Black was almost given the Dementor's Kiss- when you convinced me to save him- I fear that remains in you, Draco, I *fear* for you- that is why I held this back from you, because I was so afraid that- let alone whether you try to attempt Dantanian's spells or follow along his *path*, I was afraid the memories would make you think those terrible things about yourself were *right*-"

"I wouldn't have been with *Harry* if I knew! Bloody hell, that's what changed, wasn't it? How you went from supporting me in it at the end of fourth year, to screaming hell when you saw

us together in fifth- you knew what I was, knew what it would do to the bloody *savior* if I-"

"You know I do not have a good history with Potter's father. That was on my mind, nothing with your wand-"

"I WOULDN'T HAVE *BEEN* WITH HIM! YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME!"

"I thought it would destroy you-"

Draco almost said, *And now it has.* But he felt his anger almost drowned under shock. It was not Dumbledore but Severus who had held the real answers. It was like he needed to go back in the past *again* to make up for new mistakes. He'd thought he knew everything about this world, but he still hadn't known a thing compared to Severus. Severus had been the key all along. Severus, the one he wanted to be like- the one he would have died for-

"I have magical exhaustion." Draco made his voice painstakingly flat. "I'm going to be staying in my room in Ravenclaw for the foreseeable future. You tell Flitwick that, make him accept it. Pull rank as my godfather, I don't care how. I still have copies of the Dumbledore letter," he lied. Severus didn't react. "So- so-" His voice broke despite himself. "So you make sure. Ban non-Ravenclaws from coming to my room and visiting me, tell my uncles not to *write* to me, tell everyone I need rest. Tell Gilderoy if he's a problem that he should just keep his mouth around your *dick,* instead of trying to pry it off to talk to me *now*- just get everyone to leave me the fuck alone-"

"May I ask," Severus said tunelessly, "What you plan to do with your rest?"

Draco snatched up the talon wand- he couldn't stop thinking of it as that, even if that wasn't its name- and held it up, making damn sure Severus saw he had both it and the Pensieve memories.

"I don't want to speak to you a word more than I have to, ever again. You're not my godfather anymore. I don't want to speak to anyone in the world, except for one person."

"Dantanian Noir?"

"At least you're clever. That leaves *one* thing I thought about you that's still true."

Draco used the talon wand to cast his habitual spells on his bed, before he managed to give a thought whether he should or would keep using the talon wand.

Carefully, he took his mother's wand from his other pocket, and tried to cast a simple Lumos.

He was glad he had cast Inmotus. Otherwise, his scream as the wand melted over his fingers would have been heard by half of Ravenclaw Tower.

He had to use the talon wand again, to clear off the melted soot and ashes from his bed and his skin. And heal the burn the swift implosion had left. He almost expected it to leave an

angry red mark no matter what he did, like the talon brand, but it healed up more than fast enough. With a healing charm Severus had taught him.

"Wow, Dantanian," Draco said to the bend of the wand, something like a gnarled tree branch, ever out of place on pristine deep cerulean silk. "Seems you are the possessive kind." It was like the talon wand- like *Dantanian*, if that was the right way to describe whatever was inside- had somehow sensed he meant to replace him, and decided to get rid of the competition now after all.

If Draco had been carrying his mother's wand in hopes of giving it back to her, some futile idea of reconciliation, that dream had just become that much more distant.

She had tried to warn him. If she had told the truth, and she had really wanted to save him, then she had put herself forward in that assault, a Death Eater attack like she never had taken part in during the blue loop, really for his sake. Depending on what Bellatrix knew or had told her about Dantanian- she had risked her life again for him, this time in a desperate gambit to try and warn him. She *had* warned him, and he hadn't listened, and maimed his father and killed Theo's father before that very night was over.

Mother had warned him. Severus hadn't even tried. Who was it who had betrayed him-

"You know, Dantanian," Draco said more conversationally, poking the wand lightly, "Thinking about you and all your Titus Andronicus bullshit life is really messing with my head here. Now that I know you're in there, and the jig is up, you think maybe you might want to talk back?"

The coda was silent. Funny, given that it could also mean a part of music. If it was called a *crescendo*, would that have been enough to tip it over the edge?

He wasn't even amusing himself anymore.

"Dantanian," Draco said, and took a deep breath. He remembered how Bellatrix had kissed the talon wand, calling it Dantanian, after she took it from him. He took the wand and kissed both sides, just to be sure, but nothing happened. "Dantanian, I've seen- part of who you were. I'm sure there's more. I'll listen to whatever you want to tell me. When I- when I called myself a monster, I didn't mean you were. Just me. I mean, you turned a seven-year-old into a Dementor, but, like, you had your reasons?"

Draco considered. "Did you know I put him back on the tapestry? I guess that was a cover story. Whenever they realized he wasn't turning back, and he was old enough for it to be plausible, then they blasted him away. 'Muggle Rights.' Although, you know, I never *have* heard anything about Dementors' political position on Muggle Rights. Maybe they're progressives."

And maybe he had to go about this more formally. "Dear Dantanian," he began, clasping his hands together over the wand. "I am your- your bondmate. Soulmate," he offered, though Harry invariably came to his mind, like it was some kind of betrayal. He might have even offered to break up with Harry, like he knew he should after what he had learned. But that felt still like a promise he had no chance of fulfilling. He'd sooner sear off his own hands. And

they didn't even have any brands on them to expedite the process. "I am willing to bargain for- for contact. For information. I want us to work together."

Nothing. Okay, maybe more formal still. "Demon goddess Hecate," Draco prayed, and his mind wandered wishing Luna was here. She'd do this part better. "Please let me speak to my kinsman, my- coreblood giver, Dantanian Noir. I bear his blood, and the blood of his beloved, in my veins." Draco cast a wordless Diffindo and opened one fingertip, smearing it over the bend of the wand. He remembered bringing the minds of the Longbottoms back, and smeared more.

"I will offer any sacrifice of my possessions or myself you demand for Dantanian's allegiance. Or just- for his voice. I want Dantanian- I want him to explain, the things he did, what he tried with Astaroth-" *How he ended up murdering hundreds of people, let alone dragons. Not that he didn't mean to kill just as many back in England, if not more. Burn Hogwarts to the ground.* "I believe in your power, sacred demon goddess, and in the vow he swore to you, at Citadelle Xaphan, a century ago. Or- more, I don't know, um, years, just-"

He really did need Luna to even approach a coherent prayer. But that would mean telling her something. Suddenly he understood why Severus had spoke of burning materials. He might have tried to destroy the vial, if he hadn't feared it would anger Dantanian.

"Are you in there, Dantanian?" Draco prodded with his foot this time. "I'm sorry if I've done things you don't like. I know I haven't killed anyone in House Black, but I really do want to kill my Aunt Bella. Seriously. It's on my to-do list for this year. And, like, some of the others are, er, negotiable... but forget that, let's talk about you. I thought you seemed very- uh, clever. If you really did invent Protego Diabolica, that's cool. I always thought Grindelwald had- not that I'm calling you a liar..."

Draco groaned and flopped back onto his bed, lying next to the wand instead. He was still dressed in the nice clothes he had worn for Valentine's Day, and knew rationally that he should at least try and face the others before going to bed or retreating into hibernation. He should at least give some explanation to Harry, for ruining Valentine's Day. But he didn't even think he could *look* at Harry right now. Not that he deserved to.

"Dante, I have more compliments," he yawned. "I saw your paintings at the citadel. They're really cool. I've always liked dragons too. Did you like Imoogi? I bet you would have liked a little stuffed Imoogi, when you were living in Paris, asking your mother for a pet dragon. She could have gotten you a doll of one, at least- I don't know, maybe she did, but maybe you'd like Imoogi. If you talk to me, we can go see Hagrid and visit her..."

He didn't know what he was saying anymore. Just that Dantanian, or whatever lived inside his wand and his head, was saying nothing back.

Draco slept early then, for a long time. He was half-woken by his dormmates, trying to alert him it was breakfast time, and then by Dobby showing up. Dobby told them Draco was ill again and needed rest. He tried to speak to Draco, but eventually just left food outside. Draco

knew he should get it, but he found himself just going back to sleep, not convinced enough that anything was not a dream to make it worth it to act.

He woke sometime in the afternoon, and had both breakfast and lunch to eat. He was glad he managed, since he didn't want to worry Dobby. He wondered what Dobby would think, if he knew Draco's kindness towards house elves likely didn't come from Draco himself, but a different presence. Someone who hadn't spent his childhood in a pureblood family, waited on by them. Someone who'd experienced a pureblood family *treating* him like one. Forget how many of the bad things in him were from Dantanian. That was almost easier, than to having to wonder how many of the *good* things had been as well.

At least he knew he had loved Harry back in the *blue* loop, even if it had been in a different way. That was not some artifact of infatuation with a half-Potter Dorian. Amortentia had smelled of Harry Potter back when Draco still had a tame unicorn hair wand in his hand.

"Talk to me, Dante," he whined. He'd started to talk like this as if Dantanian was a person visibly present, just refusing to speak out of spite. The crazy one in that situation would not be the one talking, it would be the silent one, knowing they were seen and yet pretending not to hear. "I know you've helped me. Probably more than I know. Don't you want to brag about it? There's probably times I would have died without you. Or I can talk about how pretty you were. How pretty you *are*, if you'd like to produce a visual hallucination. That's one thing about you no one can argue. You *were*, like, stupid beautiful..."

Nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing, and Draco kept talking and hearing nothing. He was not sure of the time that night, close to falling asleep after a day of nothing but lying in bed hiding, shuffling to the bathroom, and eating, when his patience snapped. "What exactly is wrong with me," Draco hissed viciously, "That you would talk to Aunt Bella and not me? Am I not evil enough? Am I too much *worse* than her? What? What did I do wrong! You chose me over her at the Ministry, didn't you? You tortured her! You brand my enemies, you taught me Protego Diabolica, you chose me, why won't you *talk* to me, what's wrong with me-"

Draco found his eyes were full of tears. He didn't bother doing much with them one way or another. He just buried his face against his pillow and fell asleep.

After a few days, the inevitable intrusion came. Luna could not very well be barred from her own tower. Maybe he'd forgotten to ask to have her barred from the boys' dorms, or maybe he just hadn't had the heart. He regretted it, as his sleep was broken at some indeterminate time of day by Luna's voice calling, "Draco? Draco, are you awake? Cousin, please let me in, I wanna see *Cousin*..."

It would have taken a heart of stone not to let that sad little whine affect him. The doubts did assail him- *What if something went wrong with her and Neville and she's sad? What if it's something worse,* far *worse- what if she needs me, or someone else does, what if all our friends need me and someone dies because I can't get up the will to get out of bed-*

He still didn't move a muscle, until he heard other voices in the dorm. "Oh, hey, Lovegood," said either a Corn-something or an Entwhistle, Draco couldn't be expected to learn these

people's names, let alone their *voices*. "What are you doing in the boys' dorm? Draco is supposed to be resting."

"I know," Luna said, voice anxious, "But he hasn't been answering our letters and notes, we're not sure he's even getting them... Tony said he's never had a chance to give them to Draco in person, he's always locked in bed and Tony has to leave them outside..."

"I was gonna change," complained the other miscellaneous Ravenclaw, who could choke as far as Draco was concerned. "Now there's a weird little *girl* here."

It was perhaps a measure of how worried Luna must be, that she seemed barely to hear that swipe, let alone react or retort. "I don't know if he can hear me. He's not responding. Draco, if you don't want to talk, please just say so, just thatso we know you aren't dead in there. *Cousin...*"

One Ravenclaw said to another- probably behind Luna's back, but Draco couldn't see, or tell if she heard- "Guess stupid old Loony Lovegood really is still loony."

"HEY!" Draco yelled. Without thinking, the energy surged in him, and he cast a swift Finite Incantatem on everything and threw his curtains open. "Langlock! *Langlock*!" Luna dodged, and both Ravenclaws' hands flew to their glued tongues. "What have I always, *always* said about those who speak ill of Draco Black or *cousin*? Loony Lovegood? Are you serious? How many times do I have to tell you-"

"Draco," Luna said, coming over and taking his shoulder. She looked very contented, for someone whose honor he was trying to defend. "It's okay. I'm just glad to see you're alright." She glanced back at the Ravenclaws, hovering nervously behind her. As if he would fix the curses for them.

"Go to Snape, he'll know what to do," Draco said coldly. "He could do with more work."

Once they fled, Luna gave him a speculative glance, taking in his sweat-soaked pajamas, tangled sheets, discarded crumb-filled plates, and tangled bird's nest of hair. "Alive. I'm glad to see you're alive, but Cousin, your *hair...*"

"Who gives a shit," Draco groaned, "About my hair," and buried his face in Luna's shoulder, so he wouldn't have to see the fear on her cute little face grow.

I'm not getting out of bed until Dantanian talks to me.

That was his resolution. Which meant he did not get out of bed for a very, very long time. The only people he saw were his Ravenclaw dormmates, with whom he limited meaningful contact, and Luna and Dobby, whom he could usually convince just to let him be silent and listen to their patter, or in Luna's case lie there and cuddle him in silence. If the sleek feeling of her hair made him miss Hermione's shorter and bushier shield from the world- well, there were things he missed about all of his friends. He even missed Severus, with this treacherous

heart, feeling guilty each Sunday after each aimless week feigning illness, when Severus's summons for their weekly check-ins would come and go unacknowledged.

Luna did not ask why his recovery from this bout of magical exhaustion ended up taking longer than any other. Even if she did faithfully relate worried conversations about his absence, increasing in frequency and pitch over time. Sharp-eyed Hermione had speculated that Draco could be malingering, if not simply unmotivated to recuperate, given how Luna had found his steadily increasing supply of angel's infusion unused. Ron's perspective had been that there wasn't any investigation *needed,* to know something was wrong with Draco: if he really cared as little as Luna said about his *hair*, his and their personal apocalypse was surely upon them. Meanwhile, Harry had accepted the emptiness of the Periander graves as an explanation for Draco's panic over Severus, since Severus had been the one to investigate Periander and report about him to the Dark Lord. But that didn't keep him from sending long, passionate letters, as many as Luna would carry for him, that Draco couldn't bring himself to answer. Even if, cowardly as ever, Draco couldn't bring himself to tell anyone to make them stop, or throw them away.

Apparently there had been a Prophet issue highlighting them spending Valentine's Day together, full of affectionate pictures. From the tone of Harry's letters, he was pleased with this, despite the tone the journalists were continuing to take about the perceived mismatch. Harry said he was looking at the photos of them all the time, remembering how happy he had been that day, and looking forward to seeing each other every day again.

"Don't you miss Harry?" Luna asked one day, and he considered ejecting his cuddle-cousin from bed like some Muggle sci-fi escape pod. "I would miss Neville if I didn't see him all the time."

"I miss Harry a lot. I miss certain parts of him an *especial* lot. Just... not enough to get out of bed." *Not that it would be right for me to be near him anymore. I should end it instead of keeping him hanging, but I can't, I just* can't- "Things still going that well with Neville, hmm?"

"I've been thinking," Luna said cheerfully, "That he and I should have intercourse soon," and Draco's appalled squawking seemed the most fun she'd had in some time. Luna claimed it was a good sign, her desire for Neville, one that showed she was yet further past the specter of Tom she'd seen in the mirror. Draco warned her not to rush to any large step, just to make a point, at which Luna told him, no, it wasn't to prove something, it was, well, a *physical* sort of feeling...

Draco could understand that, much as he bleated indignantly. His body missed Harry, even as his mind told it not to. Sometimes he would bestir himself to make the effort and touch himself, and then every memory when he and Harry had gone all the way would surge through at once, some animal desperation not yet caught up to the rest of him that had given up on wanting things. But the thought afterwards that Dantanian had been watching cooled things quickly enough.

"How'd you like that?" Draco would ask Dantanian after. Or, "Performance review? You know, I take requests..." But even that was not enough to bestir Dantanian to speech. And so in his bed Draco remained, at a remove from everyone. A safe distance, most of the time,

from almost all of his nine names. That was where all the monsters that could hurt them belonged.

He could have tried to keep Luna and Dobby away, but he needed to eat, and he needed that contact to still feel human or alive at all. Sometimes Luna would hold him as he cried, clutching her and weeping hysterically for no stated reason. She would never ask why. She would just stroke his hair, and tell him, oddly enough, that it made her happy that she could be there for him.

When Ron's birthday came, he could have spent the day with him on it for once. Nothing was theoretically stopping them. And he tried. He tried to get out of bed. He did go to the bathroom, and gather up clothes, before yielding to his sense of dull powerlessness, putting the clothes back away, and climbing back into bed.

He should have tried harder. With the arrival of March came the end of Hogwarts' tolerance of their free boarder. Severus had betrayed him enough to allow Sirius and Remus to recall him. Apparently they believed the lies of continued magical exhaustion, and wanted him close enough to their care, and St. Mungo's if necessary, to help restore their adopted son to health. Those two taking parenting seriously was so *inconvenient.* Seriously, did they not realize he had been traded all of his flashy little powers for the duty to *murder* them?

He did not resist his exile to Grimmauld, as he resisted so little these days. The only question was what to do with the Pensieve vial. He thought he could keep it safe on his person at Grimmauld, as at Hogwarts, no matter how helpful his uncles would attempt to be- but the thought of even the slightest chance that *Remus* could see it, and realize what a mistake he'd made adopting Draco Malfoy-

It wasn't fear of keeping it secret, though, that made him do what he did. It was because when Luna came to hug him goodbye in his dorm, lugging his bags for him as if she was not half his size, she said something that made him decide.

"Don't be sad, Cousin." Draco's legs felt almost unused to his weight. He was told he'd grown thinner over nearly a month on his back, like a coma without the mental vacation to recommend it. "You'll be free to have all the fun you want with Neville without me to worry about. Really, you'll be better off without me."

Luna pouted up at him quite severely. "Don't joke like that, then. I know you don't mean it- I hope you don't- but it's not funny at all, so don't. I *wouldn't* be better off without you, *ever.*"

Draco felt the threat of tears at the back of his tired eyes. These days, they never seemed far away. If he was not destroyed, as Severus had feared, he *was* crushed, crushed flat and hopeless, and here Luna was trying to build him up still. "I mean, you kind of would be, though. You'd be different if we hadn't ever known each other like this- you wouldn't have done dark magic, wouldn't have suffered so much- if we hadn't been friends, then-"

"You're right, I would be different," Luna said steadily, "I'd be worse," and pressed her forehead against his, not seeming to care about the time passing or the headmaster they kept waiting. "Don't ever say anything bad about yourself, because you're saying it about me too,

remember? 'What you are, I am.' You're my reflection. And I'm yours. You're my mirror, remember? *Remember*?"

It seemed a different person who had so confidently said those words, to comfort *her*. "I remember. Just-"

"You said you can't have one without the other," Luna said stubbornly. "That we make a set. Like a package deal. That we're the exact same. And you told me I was an angel. Which means you're an angel too. And who *wouldn't* be better off, for having known an angel?"

The unquestioning faith in Luna's voice made something in Draco finally, finally crack. "Take this, then," he said, reaching into his pocket and shoving the vial at her. "It's Pensieve memories." He grabbed the bag from his luggage where he had put Severus's books, pages still marked, and shoved them at her too. "You can look- I don't know, I'd imagine the Room of Requirement could make a Pensieve for you if you wanted. Whatever, just don't try and use Snape's Pensieve. But look at the memories, and read what the books say after. Try and understand, and then- then try and tell me I'm wrong, that you'd be better off without me."

"I *know* you're wrong," Luna began.

"Just look," Draco insisted, biting back tears. He pressed it all firmly into her hands. "Then show it to whoever you want, keep it secret, destroy it, give it to Voldemort for all I care, just- stop trying to model yourself after me, Luna, stop mimicking me, stop trying to be *like* me, because- I'm not who you think I am. Once you see, you'll understand."

"Alright," Luna said, and hugged him again before she let him go. "It won't change my mind!" she yelled as she went.

If only that were true. Her faith made her sound as mad as the gravedigger's daughter who shared her name, telling her mother to dig up her father's corpse to make him alive again.

Draco ran his fingers over the talon wand in his pocket- *rudely silent as ever, Dantanian*- before he went off towards Grimmauld, and left the memories with his favorite cousin.

Phineas Black

Chapter Notes

Hey all! To answer questions about my posting schedule, I've decided to change it to every four days, because this book is just taking me longer to write- it's further afield from the books, it's more dense and lore-oriented, etc.- and I want to be sure the writing is still good :) I'll try to have every chapter up by 6 pm EST on that schedule, but if it isn't up until midnight or after, that might happen, don't worry about me ^^

Thanks so much for your thoughts and comments, I love to see all your theories and ideas and opinions! Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

Sirius and Remus should never have adopted Draco. That much was indisputable. Taking Draco's stolen power had bound him, in some mysterious blood feud, to wipe *every trace of House Black from the earth*.

But once the Portkey landed him in Grimmauld, it was hard to honestly regret that this place and these people had become his home. Whatever cost it would have, for those foolish enough to shelter a dragon.

"Draco, we've been so worried," Remus said, crushing him in a hug from one side. Sirius, usually less physically demonstrative, was even more enthusiastic, seizing him too to mess with his already tangled hair, until he made Draco flail at him.

"He's still alive," Sirius said happily. "Looks like reports of him not caring about his hair were exaggerated. Thank Merlin, if he'd given up on that, I *would* think it the end of Draco Black." He hugged Draco's other side tighter.

"Now it's even worse," Draco whined, but Remus pulled back to give him a look that would brook no argument.

"You'll wash and style it while you have your infusion. We've drawn it upstairs and added the angel's infusion. It should still be warm."

It didn't seem Draco would be allowed to be as lazy in his fake recovery, under this roof.

After the bath and hair-drying spells, Draco put on what they'd left out, new, thick fleece-lined Ravenclaw blue pajamas, with matching slippers with the eagle crest on them. He felt very cherished and spoiled, despite his own resolution to be miserable.

Remus had made the dinner tonight. Sirius assured him that Kreacher had been ordered in no uncertain terms to stay far away from Draco, however long his recovery took. Remus said he'd been in contact with Draco's professors, and would make sure Draco didn't fall any further behind on his written coursework.

"You can afford to miss some of the practical," Remus flattered him, "That's always been your specialty," and Draco didn't have the heart to retort. Something about how useless homework and school were in the face of the Death Eater threat? But given that he had personally responded to the Death Eater threat by spending a month in bed- and not even in the fun way- he probably would have been pushing his luck anyway.

He should have known they wouldn't let him off so easily. Remus came to visit before bed, easing his way in with hot cocoa and affection, before squarely asking what incident had precipitated this exhaustion. Draco fed him the narrative Harry must have, about finding Periander's grave empty on Valentine's Day and fearing for Severus, and then used as much of the truth as he could: finding out Severus was at Xaphan from McGonagall, exhausting himself getting there alone, and then throwing an embarrassing tantrum at Severus for worrying him, which had ended in imaginary "regrettable structural damage to Xaphan".

"I know I was being stupid," Draco finished, "But it wasn't just that one day. It was that I've had to deal with close to two years of him spying for the Order, even after I became one of Voldemort's most hated enemies. And nothing I do to try and protect him changes a *thing.*" Surprisingly, he found his frustration real still. It was all he could do to hold back feeling from his voice, but then, Remus had witnessed his breakdown at Severus about this very argument, last summer. This wasn't a new weakness.

"Voldemort knows about the Naufragiam, and Severus is personally helping with Xaphan, everything is just tightening the net around him. It's too much. I went to Dumbledore-" More truth in service of lies by omission. "I threatened the headmaster about it."

He snickered, one of the few real laughs he'd had in weeks, at Remus pulling back with a comically appalled slackening of his honest face. "But I've just been powerless. I've felt powerless at everything. Helpless and useless-"

"At least," Remus said gently, "We can help you recover your health here, sweetheart. And your usual magical ability. We'll get you back to fighting shape."

That won't help, Draco could have said, feeling the presence of that bent form in his pocket like a condemnation. It was a testimony to his own selfishness being here, embracing a man he was meant to kill. But he just hugged Remus tighter, murmuring his thanks. Even if he did end up turning on Remus before all this was through, he wanted Remus to know he hadn't *wanted* to.

"That explains why Severus's reports on you have been so secondhand and incomplete. It seems he's always at the citadel with Gilderoy these days. And then there's his dark mood... But do you think this, shutting him out of your life, is the right way to address your fear? Aren't you just hurting him *and* yourself? Especially if the worst *does* come- the time you could had. Won't you want that back?"

Draco pulled back, and might have said something violent or cruel. But that failed looking into those kind brown eyes, always well-intentioned however they wounded. He had no answer.

Remus stroked his hair, told him he was a sweet and good person, and put him to bed.

It seemed Remus and Sirius went to check in on the citadel every day now, meeting Frank and Alice there, along with Gilderoy and sometimes Severus. Xaphan's empty rooms had swiftly filled with carpets and beds and wall hangings, chandeliers and sconces and classroom desks. The continued rebuilding of Xaphan's structure went on, alongside efforts to make the sections already refurbished livable. Financed in no small part by the Ministry's gracious damage payments to Sirius, piece by piecemeal the old beast was coming back to life. Presumably, it was currently looking something like when Dantanian lived there.

After a few days, they offered to bring Draco with them to visit Gilderoy. Draco made a face that made Sirius snort in laughter at *that* revolting prospect.

Unfortunately, refusal to be brought to Xaphan didn't mean Xaphan couldn't be brought to Draco. Remus's kind heart was prevailed on to make the delivery right to Draco's bedside.

He'd been dozing in his far more contentedly than locked in Ravenclaw, but he was woken by that most unwarrantedly peppy of voices. It was hard to imagine any individual alive, capable of being more irritating than Gilderoy Lockhart, when you already did not want to see him.

"Er, hello there," said Gilderoy, and Draco groaned and pulled his topmost pillow completely over his head.

"Sweetheart, Gilderoy heard you were home! He wanted come visit you, and wish you the best in your recuperation," Remus said, in some humble variation of the tone his mother had used to take on, when she thought he was being rude not to greet Great-Aunt Walburga. "Isn't that awfully kind of him?"

"Mmm," Draco mumbled. "Yeah. Kind. Thanks. Now go away."

"I'll go check on lunch downstairs," Remus said. There was the sound of the bedroom door swinging shut, and descending footsteps.

"Draco?" Gilderoy asked tentatively. "I, er, I know you probably don't want to see me right now, or, erm, ever, but if I could-"

Draco rolled over, peeling the pillow off his face to regard Gilderoy balefully. A part of him was glad to have the talon wand in his pocket. If *Dantanian* could see and hear everything Draco did, a detached part of his mind wondered, drolly, what he must make of the preposterous creature known as Lockhart. A creature clad, as ever, in that excessively fine blue fur Draco had bought him. If Severus *was* spending more time with the clodpole, maybe he should look to getting him a more expansive wardrobe.

Draco had resolved that he no longer cared whether his betrayers lived or died. And here he was wondering after Gilderoy's *wardrobe*.

"Just what?" Draco refused to sit up or make an effort to accommodate Gilderoy. He'd tried meticulous politeness with this criminal, and seen where it got him. "Wondering whether I think the same of you as I did on Valentine's Day? Why should you have to ask?" Gilderoy blinked, cornflower-colored eyes unsure. "Of course I do!"

Check this out, Dante. I think you're about to witness one of the great comedic spectacles of this generation... Gilderoy Lockhart making an attempt at emotional sensitivity.

He spoke in an unusually firm and deep tone. "You don't have magical exhaustion, do you?" Draco snorted noncommittally. "You told your uncles you threw some magical tantrum at Xaphan that day. You didn't. And that you tired yourself Apparating back and forth from Hogwarts to Xaphan- Draco, you did that *before* Christmas, blind *drunk*, and you were perfectly fine-"

"Severus figured that out, didn't he," Draco yawned. "Did you tell him about that? Has he looked in the Mirror of Erised yet? I take it he didn't see-" *You,* he had at the tip of his tongue, but the idea of being cruel failed, as it often seemed to in the face of Gilderoy. It was worse than kicking a puppy. It was like compounding someone else's great crime by smaller, more petty bits of cruelty. And what was the point of that? Gratifying his own ego? Whatever he did, there was no salvaging that.

"I knew without him speculating," Gilderoy said indignantly. "And no, I *didn't* tell him. I've kept all of your secrets from each other-" He did not look to have enjoyed being in the middle. "So if you were worried-"

"Which is a fancy way of saying," Draco yawned, covering his mouth this time, "That you'll still keep Severus's secrets from me as necessary. Kind of makes whatever plea you're going to make pretty tepid. What? You've got to have some reason for coming here, other than actively making Remus's life more difficult-"

"He's very upset," Gilderoy blurted, standing above Draco's bed wringing his hands. "*Severus*. He's been foul-mouthed and snappish, even for him, and he comes around Xaphan all the time to complain about things, since I'm the only one who knows why you really fell out-"

"You don't know anything about-"

"Or even knows part of it. He hasn't told anyone else, though, not even Dumbledore. He's still on your side. He does love you- but I'm not here to plead his case or tell you to forgive him, so please don't yell at me!"

"You couldn't handle it, could you," Draco sighed, trying not to be amused by the shrillness Gilderoy reached. "Being *yelled* at."

"Not by you," Gilderoy said breathlessly, missing the joke. "You're too important. That's what I have to say. I want you to come back- to Hogwarts, to the Order, and to Xaphan-"

"Free labor must be hard to come by," Draco drawled languidly, "Without a preexisting prison sentence," and Gilderoy bristled.

"I miss you," he proclaimed, "As a friend!" He gave Draco no time to protest about whether they had been friends in the first place. "And I feel terrible you think I betrayed you, after everything you did for me- maybe I did, I don't know, but I did try to do the right thing! I did! I just didn't know what the right thing *was*!" He hung his head. "There weren't *any* good choices..."

"It comes down to choosing sides. And you chose. Severus. Fine. I always would have expected that. Personal attachment trumps objective feeling of debt. That's natural. I just never expected Severus and I to *be* on different sides-"

"*I'm* on your side," Gilderoy insisted. His wide eyes brimmed with sincerity, so much the picture of earnestness it almost made Draco distrust him more. How many men and women must Gilderoy have expressed such fealty to, before erasing their memory and making his merry way off to write another book?

"I made the decision weeks ago. I've just been waiting for a chance to tell you. You don't have to forgive me, but please, at least believe in that. I'll keep your secrets from now on, I promise. I'll aid you however I can. I do..." He looked at the wall. "I do love Severus. More- more than I can ever really say. But you're the one who gave me a purpose and took me in and made me feel like a real person again. You're the one who saved me. I'll follow *you*."

"And what, tell me *his* secrets?" Draco said caustically, refusing to buy this. For all he knew, Severus had put Gilderoy up to it.

"I would if I knew any," Gilderoy said glumly. He stood there visibly thinking, and then had an idea. "Here," he said, took off his coat, and rolled his sleeves halfway up his biceps. His wrists were as pristine, as unregistering of any past claim, as Draco's own. "I don't know if it's a secret, but Severus has been making progress with my scars."

Draco tried and failed not to feel happy for Gilderoy. "How? Before, he'd just made them fade a little-"

Gilderoy's Adam's Apple bobbed jerkily, signs of repression showing bodily as he maintained a facade of unperturbed cheer. "Antivenom. Or, antivenin, I still don't quite grasp the difference. Ah, ha, silly old me! I'd forget my own head if it wasn't attached. He's tried out all sorts- tried developing a few in reverse from vampire blood or flesh, even vampire bats, or my own blood- then finally he went through Muggle antivenoms, and one just worked like magic, when he mixed it with his vampire antivenom potion thingamajig. It was for the serp verda- the mal- malp- I don't remember the proper name. My mind, I tell you! A serpent local to... to els Pirineus- to the- the Pyrenees. It was amazing that he thought to try it, but it worked..."

Amazing what other people can accomplish in a month. All I accomplished was a lot of Dantanian Noir not *talking to me.*

"Antivenom. So whatever was added to the bites from Sade, it helps draw that out..."

Draco was reminded of Nagini's venom. He heard Remus in his head, warning him that he might regret cutting out of his life someday, if the worst should come...

"I'm glad."

"It's a shame he has to go to such effort," Gilderoy said sadly, and Draco rolled his eyes.

"Come off it, Gilderoy, you're a hero, aren't you? Isn't that what heroes deserve?"

"I'm not a hero," Gilderoy mumbled, and Draco ignored him.

"Listen to you. You can barely make yourself talk about the *snakes* around L'Infern, but you got what, two dozen children out, and they didn't get eaten by vampires *or* snakes."

"I'm not a hero."

"You risked your life and took them into the wild to safety, using the tools the vampires themselves taught you." *You didn't even have to take on any blood feuds in the bargain.* "I was wrong before, wasn't I? Not by saying you were a liar, but by acting like *nothing* is different-"

"I'm not a hero."

"Because you did what you couldn't at Hogwarts, I'll give you that: save a child from the depths of hell. So many children. You really are a-"

"I'M NOT A HERO!"

Draco listened for the sound of feet on the stairs. But it didn't seem anyone had heard. "Might wanna keep it down-"

"I'm not a hero," Gilderoy covered his mouth with both hands, tears filling his liquid blue eyes. "I'm not a hero at all."

"Oh, no. *Oh,* no. Please do not tell me that somebody else *actually* saved you and the girls, and you Obliviated them and took all the credit *again*."

"What? No! Nothing like that!"

"Then what," Draco said skeptically. "Why would you say that? Did you not free the girls from the underground prison?" Gilderoy nodded, tears running over his clutching hands. "And take them to an underground tunnel you'd dug?" Gilderoy nodded each time, openly weeping. He couldn't have hidden it if he tried, like he was a hair's breadth from crumbling completely. "And it took you all out into one of the glacier lakes. And you all had to swim for it, and you carried a girl on your back. Helped carry girls on your way through the mountains. Led them down and Obliviated a vampire who found you. Brought them into the town, all the way to safety." Still nods. "Then what the hell about that does not sound like a hero to you? You saved those girls-"

"But that's not *why*!" Gilderoy blurted. He sobbed hard after, before he could force the rest out. "That's not why I did it! I didn't think I'd succeed. I lied about *that.* I *never* thought it would work! Not for a second! I hadn't thought digging that stupid tunnel would work either! I never thought I could get myself *or* those girls away!"

"Then why did you do it?" Draco fought the urge to hug Gilderoy. He was shaking too violently from sobs, really, to hold onto. "Did you think you were leading those girls to their *death*-"

"It would have been better for them. *Whatever* happened in the escape. Freezing to death, or drowning in the lake- being caught and killed by the vampires- however they died in the attempt. It would have been an easier death than what Seguinus had planned. He *told* me what it was. Anything would have been better..."

So Gilderoy hadn't thought he was leading them to salvation. Just an easier death.

It was still a kind of mercy.

"And what about you?" Then Draco understood. "You thought it would be better for you too? Better than carrying on. You *wanted* to die with them." *A suicide mission.*

Gilderoy looked ready to die of shame. "It was just... *years*! Years and years, and it was never going to end. No matter what I did, I was the one Seguinus kept alive. At first I wanted to live, and I tried so hard to make myself useful, to survive... I don't know if it was the castle-building I learned, the Obliviation that I was always good at, or- or-"

Gilderoy's face contorted in pain. "Or what I- I *was* for him, Seguinus. But he wouldn't kill me. I *asked* him to. I told him I was too tired and couldn't carry on. I was a coward, he just wouldn't *do* it. He would laugh, it was like to *spite* me that he wouldn't let me die. I thought if I did something that bad, coming even close to escaping, or ruining their ritual- then, when they caught me, I thought he'd finally have to let me go. So I'm not a hero, Draco, I was a coward, a coward to the end..."

Draco hugged Gilderoy, and Gilderoy collapsed on him, sobbing like his heart had just broken, and was trying to force itself in jagged pieces of out of his chest. "You see? I haven't changed. I haven't. I'm still a fraud. Just a fraud. That's all, still..."

Draco feared Sirius or Remus would interrupt and find Gilderoy in this state. He didn't want to have to explain. This was one secret he didn't think he'd ever *not* want to keep.

"Gilderoy, ssh," Draco heard himself saying, actually stroking at Gilderoy's long tousled mane of blond hair. "It's alright. You can cry. I promise it's alright. And you're not a fraud. You still *saved* those girls. They *are* alive because of you. Just because you didn't think it would work- Gilderoy, that makes you *more* of a hero."

He wanted Gilderoy to believe him, but he couldn't tell if his words sank in.

"You're not a fraud," he kept telling Gilderoy. "You have changed. I was wrong. You're different. That's not you, from Hogwarts, from L'Infern, none of it. Who you are now,

Gilderoy, it's new. *You* can be someone new. Someone who... someone who doesn't want to die."

Gilderoy shrieked as Draco cut his own palm open. Draco rolled his eyes with every bit of gusto Severus had ever put into that expression. "I thought you'd seen the memories. What did you expect?"

"You could have warned me," Gilderoy said breathlessly. Gilderoy's face in more light looked more swollen. After leaving Grimmauld, he must have cried more. But he had still been waiting for Draco at midnight as promised, inside the observatory.

Draco rolled his eyes again, and tried to increase the glow of the candles around them, for Gilderoy's sake. He still had to use his wand to heighten the flames, rather than just wave a hand in their direction like Dantanian could.

"No, I'm sorry, go on..." Gilderoy stood watch as Draco cut his hand open and began to draw with the blood on the stone. "Do you need a picture? Are you sure that's the right shape?"

"I know how to draw Hecate's wheel," Draco said stubbornly, though in truth, maybe he shouldn't have let Luna be the one to draw it back when. He'd only carved it himself with a knife. But who knew how precise Hecate kept her aesthetic standards? There had to be poor sinners on this earth deserving of the blessing of the great demon goddess Hecate who wouldn't exactly make it into an art honors society.

Draco couldn't trust Gilderoy wouldn't report this to Severus, even after today. But this opportunity was valuable. And it wasn't a difficult ritual. The hardest part, after managing a credible impression of some snakes around some stars, was willing himself to do the unthinkable: let Gilderoy Lockhart cut his hair.

"Just a bit, right?" Gilderoy said anxiously. "I'm not qualified to give you a new look, if that's what you're thinking of, to try and look less like Dorian Malfoy, or- or your godfather. I mean, I certainly could use some form of hair treatment myself- a trim at least- but the secret of Xaphan and myself cannot be let loose into the world, Remus says, 'just' because I am sorely in need of a quality hairdresser..."

Draco let himself laugh. Maybe he had missed Gilderoy back. If only for this very real earnestness, even with a face still mottled from crying, complaining about Remus's lack of solicitude for his hair.

It took Gilderoy an inordinate amount of time to cut, but eventually, enough blond hair landed in the stone. "Make sure none of yours got in," Draco warned. Gilderoy solemnly went through hair by hair, to make sure all of it was white-blond and not faded gold. "Step back. Time to see if I'm worthy of Dantanian's legacy."

"Dantanian Black," Gilderoy asked quiveringly, "Or Dantanian Noir?"

Draco considered. "Both, if they're on offer. Alright. Demon Goddess Hecate, hear me." Gilderoy went off and plastered his back to the furthest wall, while Draco cut and healed his palm again. He smeared blood over the whole talon wand. *Here, Dantanian, don't say I never did anything nice for you.*

"Dignusanguine!"

Nothing happened. Draco tried again.

"Dignusanguine! I am the worthy heir to House Black! Hell, I am the *legal* heir to House Black! Let me in! Let me in! Dignusanguine!"

He tried several different pronunciations, and nothing. Eventually, he was forced to give up, and Gilderoy stopped clinging to the wall like his life depended on it. At least it seemed activity had helped take Gilderoy's mind temporarily off darker thoughts- as it had, in truth, for Draco.

He brushed off Gilderoy's attempts at consolation, acting like he hadn't ever expected the door to open for him. "I just would have never forgiven myself, if I didn't at least try."

Gilderoy seemed loath to let him go. "So, since it was no luck there... is it, er, back to spending everyday in bed, then?"

Draco patted poor Gilderoy on the arm. "No, it's back to Hogwarts. I'll have to do it, if only because someone'll have to be there for Sunday check-ins, and look in *properly* on this tragic old Defense professor of mine..."

"Me or Severus?"

"You!" Draco exclaimed. It was hard not to chuckle, seeing that Gilderoy, despite his affections, would readily accept Severus's description as 'tragic'. "I said 'old', didn't I?"

Gilderoy blinked. "I thought you meant Severus *is* old. Well, I know he's only a few years older than me, but I suppose he *seems* much older..."

Draco eventually stopped laughing long enough to say his goodbyes. "I'll go back to Hogwarts," he promised as he left. "There's just one more thing I need you to do for me first."

The next afternoon saw Sirius and Remus making their normal trip to Xaphan. Unlike the usual trips, Draco had it on good faith that Gilderoy would keep them there for at least an hour, more if he could manage it. That should be enough time for his purposes.

It had been in his mind since the second he stepped under this roof. He made sure to groom himself and dress for the task, rather than wandering down to Grimmauld's entry hall in his pajamas. He had to look the part of House Black's heir. And besides, the person he had to speak to had a weakness for men with long hair- men of his blood, and young. *Too young.*

He threw off the drape over the painting, as if uncovering a *freshly* laid corpse. "Phineas," Draco said softly, "Come out, come out, wherever you are," and poked at the empty painting.

He lost his patience quickly. "Come over to this side, lowlife, or I'll cut this canvas to pieces. This is Draco-" He almost said Malfoy before he caught himself. "This is Draco Black! You know I can do it!" After only seconds, his patience broke further. "Come on, Phineas! How long have you been waiting for a reunion with Dantanian Noir?"

There was that face that should never have been so familiar.

If he was Sirius's great-great-grandfather... no, Draco didn't have the patience to work out what that relation was to himself. There was only relation that mattered: half-brother and half-sister, and the half-sister's child.

How convenient, that there was a painting remaining, so the perpetrator of so much could be called to account. Phineas was older, of course, with his dark eyebrows thinned and a beard grown, although no gray hair evident. It was a pointed beard that proved Phineas must have been lied to, and lied to several times, to not only think it a good idea, but consent to be immortalized with such an offense against aesthetics.

But then, this was a man who had offended against nature, checking so many of the possible boxes of ways to do so. Aesthetics were not even worth the notice.

"What did you say?" Phineas gasped, his dark eyes so much like Sirius's focusing on Draco, through the barrier of canvas. The miniature human before Draco looked strangely more like his great-great-grandson with more age, as if there had been some spirit animating him in his forties, some ill voice within driving him during the lifetime of Dantanian, which had since faltered and given up the ghost. "Did you say Dante- *Dantanian*-"

"I don't know if I want to talk to you more about him, or Astarte Noir." He pulled out his wand and held it up in front of the canvas.

Phineas peered out at it doubtfully. "We all know you unlawfully wield your aunt's wand, boy. Have you summoned me for such-"

Heat pulsed so fiercely in Draco's hand, he nearly dropped it. His grip would have let go, were it not for the need to show a strong face. "Astarte Noir. You ordered her and her son killed."

"What-" Phineas paled so substantially, it gave rest to any insidious suspicions Draco had mulled over, whether the memories had been false. "What- you- you have no evidence of this!"

"You're on trial, Phineas." The wand felt so alive in Draco's hand, it almost seemed liable to unbend. He had never felt something seethe so unnaturally, as if a blinding rage had overtaken him, but only his right arm. "On trial like you should have been in life. It's been a hundred years- more, and you *surely* thought you'd gotten away with it, right? Your legacy secured?"

"I'm already dead," Phineas said dismissively, although the painter must have quite closely captured the likeness, to render fear in those distinctive Black half-lidded dark eyes. It was

just as they had looked in Dantanian's memory, staring into blue fire. "This is nonsense. You can't-"

"I can blast you," Draco said confidently, "Off the family tapestry." Oh, Phineas did not seem to like the look of that. "I will no matter what you're really guilty of, if you commit the sin of *lying to me.* You may think that I am only the heir, not the lord, and I can't take on such power. But you must have seen me destroy Walburga's portrait. I have the power to end you on tapestry *and* canvas, *and* I will be the only soul in this house for hours." He wrinkled his nose. "Well, there's Kreacher, but he's been confined to his room, he doesn't count. So if you ask how I can take it upon myself to try you? By what right? I'll tell you. *Power.* Does that sound familiar?"

Draco waited until it was clear he had subdued any resistance. That face's elderliness and its resemblance to Sirius did not make it any sympathetic, only more pathetic.

"If that's still not enough, I speak as the voice of the only one who truly has the right to try you. Dantanian." Phineas actually screamed, the sad old vampire bat of a man. "He's here, you know. Right here. I can feel it, his need to scour every remnant of you from the earth. He's here in my wand. I've spoken to him and heard his story. Now I want yours. But remember, if you lie, I let Dantanian do as he likes."

"No, this can't be happening. After so many years- I thought he was gone-"

"So you heard about what happened in New Zealand."

"Yes," Phineas said, and Draco had never thought paintings could sweat like that. It was almost impressive. "Yes, I did, and- you may not believe me, but- I grieved. I grieved for him." He shrunk back where he stood, at Draco's harsh laughter. "I did! I couldn't help it. I knew he would have been my doom, mine and everything I loved. Even just when I found out who he was and let him live, I thought it, but I couldn't stop myself, Draco." Draco's nostrils flared, at the sound of this creature presuming to speak his name. "I loved him."

"You *loved* him!" Draco's voice went shrill and uncanny to his own ears. An arm that had been swelling with heat and anger seemed now to be going almost numb. "You ordered him killed at seven, along with his mother, the only person he had in the world. And when you learned who he was, you lied about his mother's death to him. You refused to take him in as family. You would only take him as a whore. You violated him. A child of sixteen. Your own nephew. You violated him with his mother's blood still on your hands, because it is there *still,* Phineas, it will *never* leave them! Even if I shred this painting and burn it to ash, the blood of Astarte Noir will remain in the ashes-"

"I know," Phineas gasped, overwhelmed. "And it seems that you know, Draco-" Draco held up a warning hand. "Heir to House Black. You know it all. But I- I have suffered for it-"

"No, your son did," Draco said coldly, "And you kept it a secret, and made your sons lie for you, and cast off their brother as a blood traitor for all the world- did you even tell his *mother* the truth?" Phineas shook his head, without the emotion that Draco's rant about Dantanian had brought. "That woman was just a convenience to you, wasn't she? No more important than house elves, just a useful accessory to the pureblood lord. No matter how many sons she

gave you. Did she never even get the chance to know, who it was you really..." Draco wrinkled his nose. "Supposedly, 'loved'?"

"I did love him! I knew it was wrong- knew it was against everything I believed in, every code I had held to for so long, but in spite of it all- I loved him! I still..."

Phineas didn't seem able to finish that. Nor did Draco's fizzing right arm, or the wand that felt a mere extension of it, seem appeased. "The word for that isn't love," Draco spat. "The best you could call it is obsession, or madness. But you weren't mad, you were calculated. You were the headmaster, and he was a student under your charge. A *fifth-year.* An orphaned fifth-year without any place to go. It would have been a horrific abuse of power- would have been enough to make you a monster- even *without* him being your nephew. Even if you hadn't been the one who *made* him an orphan- how can you try and call that *love*-"

"It was," Phineas insisted. "I tried to fight it. I did. But it was hopeless. Once I knew who he was, I started watching him, and then I couldn't stop. I just always wanted to look at him." Draco felt his stomach turn. But Phineas went on, as if this narrative would somehow not further condemn, but *exculpate* him. "I never felt anything for anyone male before, or anyone- young, but Dantanian- he was just- there was no one in the world, there will never be anyone like Dantanian-"

"What, because he was so *beautiful*? You were drawn to him, no matter how much you denied or resisted it?"

Phineas looked inexplicably relieved. "Yes! I don't know if you've seen him. His hair, his eyes, that pretty, cruel little smile... But unless you saw him in the flesh- living, moving- you would never understand *how* beautiful he was. More beautiful than any man *or* woman. It was like he was both and neither. He had this haze around him, like pure power, or moonlight-"

"You're not a poet, so don't try." The nausea was too thick in Draco's throat to carry on with this farce much longer. "All that nonsense adds up to is the same excuse rapists have used forever: I couldn't help it, it wasn't my fault, it was their fault!"

"I don't deny anything," Phineas said proudly. "End me if you must. But I did what I did because of the great passion of my life. No one has or ever will love anyone or anything the way I loved Dantanian Noir."

"Did you tell anyone what Dantanian did to your son?"

"No," Phineas said more tightly, "But of course my other sons had seen. We never talked about it, except to discuss the cover story. And I never spoke the name Dantanian Noir, or let any other living soul set foot on Citadelle Xaphan while it was mine, not until the day I died. Heir of House Black, you must understand- not forgive, but understand- I was not a monster-
"

"You were," Draco said unhesitatingly, "Of all the men I have ever known, the *most* monstrous. Sectum-"

"Wait! Dumbledore- I carry his messages- for the Order of the Phoenix- you're on that side, aren't you- you'd be destroying-"

"You could have no conception," Draco said with quiet satisfaction, "How much I enjoy it, that this also deals any kind of blow to *Dumbledore.* Sectumsempra!"

It wasn't as gratifying as expected, though, the howling screams of Phineas Black, as he was split open into jagged horizontal lines, living tatters that each writhed in incomprehension of their severing. Eventually, they fell in individual tatters of canvas and were forever still, all without Draco feeling much appeased. Nor did the wand seem ready to give up the grudge.

"It's alright, Dantanian," Draco said, and pressed an impulsive kiss to the end of the talon wand. It was not just heat and the buzz of barely-constrained magic there, but some aftertaste of blood. "There's still a family to cast him from."

Sirius and Remus found Draco with his hands and wand bloody, finishing the process of blasting Phineas junior from the tapestry, after he had already gotten Phineas Nigellus done. Remus let out a horrified sound that alerted him to their presence, before Sirius stalked forward to stand between Draco and the tapestry. "Have you gone mad?"

"I see," Remus observed more wryly, "Your magical exhaustion has begun to improve."

"Who did you blast from the tapestry?" Sirius growled, then turned and started back. "Phineas? Phineas Nigellus? Just like the painting? Draco, he carries messages from us for Dumbledore, and back! If he hadn't, the Order would never have found Arthur Weasley in time, before he bled out in the Department of-" He faltered, at Draco's lack of reaction. "It wasn't random. You knew that, didn't you? Is that why?" Sirius's hand, snowdrop ring glinting with a brilliance that made Draco regret, trailed from the blasted space of the father to the son. "The other Phineas too? What, were you not sure which *one*? Better safe than sorry, huh?"

"Sirius," Remus said, stepping forward and taking his hand, "I don't think yelling and getting angry is going to solve anything-"

"No! Maybe someone should have yelled at him a long time ago!" Sirius whirled back on Draco, with a ferocious fire in those dark eyes so much like Phineas's recently emptied ones. "What is this? Some kind of childish retaliation against Dumbledore? Your godfather? *Us*? We've been too coddling as your new parents-"

"Punish me as you like," Draco drawled, "I don't particularly care," and Sirius swore under his breath, before yelling again.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?"

"Sirius-"

"It's not just magical exhaustion! You're not yourself, Draco! You haven't been since you came home! It's like you don't *want* to get better! You haven't been yourself at all!"

"Sirius-"

"I don't know what you're going through, or what stupid grudge against Dumbledore you're playing out, but doing crazy things like this- staying in bed for a *month*- I don't believe it's just magical exhaustion, there's more-"

"Draco," Remus said, voice quiet and gentle, "If you would let us take you to a Mind Healer-"

Draco far preferred Sirius's bellowing, to that kind of offer.

"You can't just drop off the face of the earth, Draco! We need you! Your friends need you! Harry needs you, the Order needs you-" Sirius saw Draco's eyes drop to the talon wand. It seemed he knew Draco well enough by now, to read his mind from that little. "And not because of your fucking power! Because you're *you*!"

"Don't swear at him, Padfoot-"

"And even if you weren't even dating Harry, he'd still need you! We all would, Draco, because you're a part of this, like it or not, you can't just drop out now! *I* need you! I need- I need my nephew who's not afraid of anything!"

Sirius's voice broke on the last words, and Draco stepped forward and hugged him as hard as he could. "I'm sorry," he gasped, burying his face in Sirius's shoulder. He could feel Remus join them, hugging them both. "I'm so sorry. You're right. You're right. I'll go back to Hogwarts. I'm not tired anymore. I'll go back. I'm sorry."

Draco had expected some form of remonstration from the headmaster, when the Portkey took him into his office. Especially after his eyes went instinctually to where Phineas Black's portrait had been. The painting was not yet removed, but it was just an empty landscape now. Even then, Dumbledore just told him mildly, "It is good to see you well again, Mr. Black."

Draco spared the fraud one last glance as he made his unappreciative way out. It looked as if the great Albus Dumbledore's wilting hand had gotten even worse.

"FRANKENSTEIN!" a near-hysterical voice shrieked. Even before her flailing limbs seized him like she would never let him go, he knew it was his best friend.

"Striker." The feeling of comfort as he buried his face in her thick bushy hair was bone-deep. "I'm sorry it's been so long, but Luna was telling me about what was going on with everyone-"

"Are you feeling better?" She pushed him to arm's length to study him. "Luna- she doesn't think you had-"

"Not here." Draco cast a glance back towards Dumbledore's office. Hermione led him towards the stairs. The halls were empty, the world dark outside. It was after curfew, but then, Hermione did have her prefect badge on. And a fine job she was doing, patrolling the corridors for dark and sinister intruders.

"Luna doesn't think you ever had magical exhaustion at all," Hermione whispered as they made their way, down relievingly familiar moving steps. "She thinks it was just that you couldn't bring yourself to get out of bed, after what you saw."

"Hermione," Draco said, stopping her at a landing. "Did you- did she show you the memories?"

"We looked in the Room of Requirement, like you told her." Hermione's faithful pretty face did not falter. "You should have let me see right away, Draco, and told me anything else you know. I have *some* guesses, but they're not especially educated ones-"

"You know." Draco might have sunk down onto nearby steps, had they not already moved away from him. "You know about Dantanian and the talon wand. You know what's really wrong with me. You know what I *am* now." He searched her face for repulsion and found none, nor even fear. "Hermione, you don't think differently of me?"

"Why would I?" she said briskly. "You didn't choose this knowingly. And I don't know how many of those symptoms in that book for a coda you've experienced, but you'd told me already what you and Theodore Nott found out, about Astaroth the dragon. That was back in fourth year. This just makes that make more sense. If you've been hiding yourself away because you think you're a monster, Frankenstein, I'd appreciate it if you put *that* nonsense swiftly behind you. I don't see any monster here."

"Looks can be deceiving."

"Not these." Hermione seized his hand firmly. "You're still my best friend, Draco. That's who you are. And I believe in you."

Draco had to bite his tongue so hard to hold back tears, it made his face fall forward. She let him collapse on her shoulder for a minute, stroking his hair, and then she pulled him along.

"So this is not the time for despair..."

"For what, then? Rejoicing?" Draco asked sardonically.

She gave him a severe look. "If I hadn't missed your bratty temperament so much, Draco, I would be quite cross at you. You must be being purposefully obtuse-"

"Oh, right." It felt like clouds were clearing around him, clouds in the sky that had been blocking every light for so long. "Research. It's the time for research."

"Luna and I have already begun, of course. It would help if you'd answer some questions, so I can see if you're in agreement about my suppositions. First of all-" She looked around, but

there was no one else on the staircase out of Hogwarts. It was lucky Draco had Apparated in with a winter coat, and that she happened to be wearing one as well.

"Luna went to your godfather about this. I'm sure you'll be furious, but it was my idea, not hers, and she didn't actually tell him anything. She just asked Professor Snape if you had gotten any gifts recently- you know, acting like she was worried you might have been enchanted, and that might be what's hurting you. He just told her everything she asked. About where you got the vial, that the assessor Periander had left it to you inside that ritual dagger, but he found it and kept it from you until now... Was I wrong to have her do that?"

"I don't care what he thinks. Did he tell her any of his theories?"

"No, but I've been wondering- there's so much that doesn't make *sense*. So many mysteries I want to solve- don't worry, Draco, I'm *going* to solve them. The life of Dantanian, that room in Xaphan, the Mirror of Erised- Luna and I checked, but it does seem gone from the Room of Requirement, Dumbledore must have taken it-"

Draco was not looking forward to her finding out he'd been keeping things from her again. He let that lie for now.

"The magic involved- do you think he tried to turn *Astaroth* into a Dementor?"

She sounded abashed at her outlandish guess, but he nodded. He felt another spark of uncertain hope, at this reminder of his best friend's sheer, indefatigable intelligence. "That's what Severus had decided, he told me." He bet Hermione had figured it out quicker. "And he said that he thinks the talon wand's a coda with Dantanian's blood in it, that Dantanian is the coreblood giver, and I'm his kinsman..."

"Charged with blood feud?" Hermione finished, and Draco nodded more grimly. "Against House Black? Oh, Draco, no wonder you were so upset... but surely, if it was *absolute*, you've had more than enough chances to kill members of House Black before now. Think about it. *I* have. Even when you were fighting your parents, even when your father tried to *kill* you... if the vow Dantanian made really bound you, fully, wouldn't you have killed them at that time? I know you *hurt* them badly, but..."

She lowered her voice, brown eyes shining wide and sad in the night. "They abused you, Draco, and neglected you. I don't know about wizarding law or opinion, Draco, but for Muggles, it's considered understandable, even defensible, to retaliate against one's abusers. The fact that you didn't do *worse* than you did- I think that means Dantanian *isn't* in control of you. And then there's the circumstances *around* the memories- why he made them, why he left them to Dorian Malfoy, if they remained in the Periander family until *Pammaque* Periander ended up with them, or there's something more- why Dorian and Lamia were just cut from the Malfoy family tree as if they never existed, but not the Periander-"

"What do you mean, Dorian and Lamia?"

"Oh, we found some Periander family records. Dorian married Lamia in 1895, and they both died early- I forget when, not too long, after the turn of the century- well, Lamia didn't *die*,

she turned into a Maledictus- don't look *surprised,* Draco, it was obvious from the memories that would happen, the poor girl- alright, we're here!"

Despite the chill night air, so unusual a sensation for the past month, it had taken him this long to realize. Hermione had led him not to Ravenclaw Tower, but out of Hogwarts. They were at the edge of the Quidditch pitch, high towers like great nostalgic colorful ghosts. The closest was, as it happened, the looming expanse of green, which had once been his. "Hermione, what are we doing out here?"

"I know you've had a rough time of it," Hermione said briskly, "But I hope you know we've all been pretty down without you. And I didn't think it right, to not take you to see him as soon as he could." She looked up at the sky. Draco could make out a circling figure, hovering near the brass hoops. His heart began to beat faster, before she cupped her hands to her mouth and yelled, "RON!"

It wasn't clear what that did to Draco's heart then, how much it was disappointment or relief. "It will be good to see Ron, but- Hermione, does he know?"

"DRACO?" Ron bellowed, voice distant but enthusiasm unmistakable. He began a swift dive towards them.

"Luna and I thought it better not to tell *anyone* else- just Rat Thieves- we felt awful, lying to our boyfriends, but we couldn't put that on them, to keep it from Harry- and if Harry's to know, that should be *your* choice-"

"How did you find out about the Perianders?" he asked in the last moment before Ron arrived.

"Oh, that was easy, Luna and I broke into his old house- Ron!" she exclaimed, and leaned up to kiss him as he landed.

Ron kissed his girlfriend back, with a naturalness even in midair that spoke to no mishaps there in Draco's absence. Then he was on his own feet, broom tossed away, and Draco got yet another hug like he was a miracle returned from the dead. Ron clasped him unabashedly, so strong it almost hurt. "Frankenstein, it is so good to see your stupid face," Ron exhaled. He tugged on his unruly long hair so much Draco shrieked, and Hermione began to giggle.

"I'm sorry," Draco tried to say, weighted with guilt, "I keep missing your birthday," and Ron just cackled and shook him.

"Who gives a rat's arse? You're here, you're here! It was like you'd died or something! Cor, half the time I suspected you had, and Luna was just lying about seeing you to soften the blow-"

"*Ronald*," Hermione said sharply, but Draco was laughing.

"Sorry, mate, but you just ditched Harry on Valentine's Day and disappeared!" Ron stepped back from Draco, taking Hermione's hand with casual, unthinking confidence. It made Draco feel more steady, just to see them like this, unequivocally a pair. Even if Hermione had to

keep things from Ron, for Draco's sake. "I mean, I can't fault your sense of dramatics, but it was bloody awful on the rest of us, you know? Sorry, I know you didn't mean it, but... I'm not mad, I'm just so relieved. Merlin's beard, you're *here*!"

"He's here," a different voice said more softly.

"Harry!" Hermione cried. "What are you doing here?"

There he was, the prophesied savior of the wizarding world, the Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived, the famous and powerful Harry Potter. There he was, Draco's nominal boyfriend, Gryffindor Quidditch captain, Hogwarts' youngest ever Seeker, in scarlet Gryffindor Quidditch robes that made him unmistakable in the night, even without the glow off his glasses, and the flush of moonlight across the most perfect face Draco would ever see. The most perfect green eyes.

There he was, Draco's wild, adorable little deranged stalker, clumsy nervous Harry, Harry who loved him, Harry who always wanted to protect him, Harry who never knew the right thing to say or do around him, Harry who made him miserable and made him happy- Harry who he had gone a full month without seeing, for the first time in two and a half years. Harry who he should cast away from him. Harry who he could never cast away.

"Harry," Draco breathed. Harry took a step closer, face uncertain. Either he still didn't have a clue what to do about Draco, or he didn't fully believe Draco was actually here.

"Harry, I thought you weren't allowed to come to the extra flying sessions," Hermione said awkwardly, with an apologetic look to Draco that Harry had to notice.

"That's, er, my fault, sorry, guess I didn't mention it," Ron said sheepishly. "I just invited him tonight, cause he seemed so glum- had no idea Draco would be back all of a sudden, so, er..."

"Ron," Harry said, "Have you had a chance to talk to Draco?"

His eyes weren't leaving Draco for a second. Just the sound of his voice tied Draco's stomach in knots. It was like after so long apart, turning over the idea in his head everyday of breaking it off, it was back to when they were first getting involved, the same suspicions of his own insufficiency. But Harry's gaze held him just as spellbound. Maybe more, now that he seemed was Draco was bound to and yet refused to lose. *I should let him go. He should be at Ginny's flying session tomorrow instead, get rid of Millie. It should be him and that brave beautiful stainless girl, not me he looks at with eyes like I'm the entire world. But it's me still, it* is*, he's looking at me and I can't let those eyes go-*

"Yeah, mate." Ron exchanged a glance with Hermione. "So, er, me and 'Mione, we'll just, er, see Draco tomorrow, right? Bye!" He took his broomstick and made a hasty retreat towards the broomshed, dragging Hermione with him.

Draco's insides clenched, some treacherous excitement already at Harry's touch, grabbing his hand the same way and leading him in the opposite direction. They ended up in the stands, in that place where Harry had used to hide to watch him. By the time Harry settled an unresisting Draco there, Ron and Hermione were fully gone.

"God, I missed you. I missed you so much." Harry hugged him like the others had, like his life depended on it. The difference was that Harry didn't let go.

Draco had expected possessiveness and remonstration, rebuke at not answering his letters, however 'sick'. But where Harry placed the blame became immediately clear, mouth forming words against Draco's neck, where his face had nosed aside Draco's hair. "It's my fault, isn't it? Whatever I did, I'm sorry. You were upset at the graveyard, you thought your godfather was going to die, and you got angry at me- was I too slow to understand? Did it not seem I was taking it seriously? Or did you think I would be *fine* with that happening? I wouldn't, Draco, anything that would hurt you I would fight so hard to stop- please just tell me what I did *wrong*-"

"Nothing." Draco pulled his face back. Harry made a childish protesting noise against his throat, and Draco pressed a hard kiss to his lips, any resolution evaporating with the unquestionable rightness of this- because he should never have let them be tied together, but they were. There was no untying this knot except in the Gordian sense, Alexander's way. There was no taking back how much kissing Harry felt like *belonging*.

"You did nothing wrong, dragonslayer, *I* was just wrong, I was- I was sick." In a sense, it was true, he had been ill. If not in body.

"*Draco*." Harry nuzzled against his hair, breath steaming hot in the freezing night. He groaned just at the feeling of Draco's gloved hands circling his cold neck, knotting at the collar of his red robes for that bit more security that Harry wasn't going to let go. "You still should have written to me, Draco. Please, if this happens again, at least write. Please don't shut me out again, it would kill me- I think it already *did*-"

"Never," Draco vowed, "Never," and kissed Harry until he could hardly breathe or feel his fingers or toes from the cold. Harry was the warmth that secured him, the warmth that drove away the encroaching numbness with prickling uneasy life. "I missed you more, I did, I swear, I missed you more..."

"I love you," Harry said, in that way that meant he wanted to be damn sure Draco heard and understood. "I love you more than anything in the world. And that is never going to change. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Draco gasped, pressing a series of hard desperate kisses to Harry's mouth between words. "Yes, I do, I love you too..."

Then an icy feeling down his spine made him wrench away, turning abruptly back towards the pitch.

"What?" Harry's fingers had been toying adoringly at the feathery white fur of Draco's collar, and the hair that fell against it, almost the same color and feel. Now they stopped. "What's wrong?"

"I just- I thought I felt someone watching us."

Harry frowned and pulled out the Marauder's Map, and Draco couldn't help the gasp that escaped. Heading away from the Quidditch pitch, at a rapid pace, was a dot marked *Theodore Nott.*

Harry drew his wand. "No," Draco said instinctively, grasping his wrist, "No, don't, we're at- the Quidditch stands, he might have just wanted to come practice, and then he saw us and left. He doesn't follow me anymore, right, that's over..."

"Because you've been locked away." Harry's strong shoulders were tensing up, ready for battle, to chase Theo back to Hogwarts and cut him open if necessary-

"He doesn't, or you'd have seen. Harry, the Kingsnakes from last year, the ones who aren't on the team anymore, they *do* that, they come practice extra at night, so they won't be seen... it's Slytherin in-house politics, I know it, so please, just..."

"What?" Draco could see Harry starting to listen. "What do you mean? *Who* does that?"

"Everyone," Draco lied. "All of them. So let it go. If you want to go back to the castle, go back with me. It *is* getting cold." Draco gave him a look through his eyelashes, though he didn't know how much Harry could see the intent in it in the night. "I'll do whatever you want, to make *you* forgive *me,* for leaving you alone so long. As long as you take me back where it's warm."

"Dragon," Harry whispered back, "How could I ever say no to you?"

On the walk back, though, hand in hand, Harry asked the question Draco had been dreading. "What did it? What did you do to make the magical exhaustion that bad? It couldn't have *just* been Apparition to Xaphan, even if it's far. You've been Apparating since what, third year-"

Draco stopped on the path. It suddenly felt an unmarked one, a crossroads that only he and not Harry could see.

"Harry. I'm keeping secrets from you, of course. I always have and I always will. You know that, don't you? I'm always going to have to keep secrets from you. And if you want to be with me, you have to accept that. You can work with Dumbledore, and I'll do my work on my own, that you and the headmaster *can't* know. That's how it will have to be, I'm sorry."

Harry stared at him long enough that they started to get cold again. He was so adorable when he shivered. Draco pressed a kiss to Harry's flushed icy cheek, and then the other.

Harry exhaled. "Okay, Draco. I trust you. You can keep your secrets."

"This feels like the best day of my life! The Rat Thieves, together after a hiatus, back and better than ever! On another mission to uncover a mystery only they can-"

"Luna, we probably won't find anything," Hermione cautioned, but Luna was irrepressible, even once Draco Side-Alonged them both to the deserted forest from the pictures.

"Here we are! It's Rat Thief in Chief, our founding member, Draco Lupin Black, nee Malfoy-
"

"Luna, it's not like I'm not a Malfoy anymore because I got married-"

"Lower your voice, just because it's his mother's house doesn't mean it's any less dangerous than last time-"

"Hermione Jean Granger, Rat Thief Second in Command, the brave undaunted Gryffindor, with her magnificent lion's mane of hair-"

"Oh my God," Hermione groaned, covering her face in embarrassment.

"And Luna Lovegood, Rat Thief Strategist in Chief, back with the brilliant plan to *follow the will*... I'm like Agatha Christie..."

"Luna, she *wrote* mysteries, she didn't solve them..."

Draco had to grin to himself, stopping so Luna could finish her effusions before they neared the house. They had already been planning this trip after Hermione and Luna had visited Pammaque Periander's old house, having found some useful records but not the answers they really wanted. It made sense to investigate here as well, again uninvited. Yes, looking over the papers had shown the woman recently dead. But even if the family curse, leaving this elderly female Periander untouched, hadn't been interesting enough... there was, as Strategist Luna bragged, the question of what Periander had left her. And if any of that held secrets like the dagger.

It was a Muggle area, not too far from Newcastle. That meant they were traipsing through knee-deep snow, and dislodging more if they even stepped near the glimmering, drooping white trees that lined the path. Her address from the Ministry registry, though, was so cut-off from the nearby small town, she must have had little fear of breaking the Statute of Secrecy.

They were another ten minutes, following a path Hermione began to doubt led anywhere, before they caught their first glimpse of the cottage. With sheets of ice covering its roof and all its age, it was as lovely from a distance as if it had just been built, for a princess in exile.

Once they neared, Hermione had a different fairytale in mind. "Hansel and Gretel," she said grimly. "That's what this feels like. Don't eat anything."

Luna and Draco exchanged blank looks. "Does that mean I'm not allowed to catch snowflakes on my tongue?" Luna asked dubiously. It had begun to snow lightly, and she had indeed been engaging in such a sin for minutes on end.

Draco couldn't resist sticking out his own tongue to lick one out of the air. Then he cast guilty warming charms on them all. "Well, we can only get poisoned and die once."

"You wizarding children never got told that fairytale either? It's *German*!" Hermione hissed, cold-reddened cheeks going redder still. "Just- never mind! Forget I said anything!"

They all fell silent, once the cottage loomed fully into view. It was indeed a ramshackle kind of construction from closer up, even with a blanket of white camouflage, but more uniform and ancient in style than, say, the Burrow. It had what looked like miniature turrets at each sides. Draco was caught up admiring them, before Hermione fell silent before the door, footsteps halting in front of the snow-buried steps. She put a finger to her lips and pointed up.

Draco didn't understand at first- he really had been out of action too long- until Luna nudged him, and whispered in his ear, "Smoke! There's a chimney letting out smoke!"

"It could be a curse against intruders," Draco whispered.

"Or," Hermione whispered back, "It's just that someone's inside." She used her wand to melt the snow beside her feet, and found one of the large uneven gray stones that lined the buried path. Draco smiled at her, taking a step back with Luna, and she carefully levitated the stone, wordless, before floating it to the front door. Against the icicle-laden bronze, she twice let it hit.

Knock, knock.

They all kept their wands raised and waited. Draco could swear he heard footsteps inside the house, long before he did.

And then the door opened, not with a face, but a wand. Red light flashed out, a wordless Stunner.

Draco wasn't sure if he cast wordlessly too, or it was the talon wand itself, throwing up ashield just before the Stunner hit. He cried out in shock, spell striking his shield hard enough to make him stagger back. Luna seized his arm, light eyes huge and fearful.

But Hermione was already staring back at the man in the doorway, vampirically pale in his ragged old shapeless gray robes. His dark hair, hanging limply about his frame, was getting patterned in white, as the snow fell down faster on all of them. Hermione had never met him, but she might have recognized him, if just from description. Let alone the faded resemblance to Lamia.

Eyes met Draco's. They were piercing violet.

Then Pammaque Periander turned and fled inside his mother's house.

Two Gardens

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco tried to dart right into the house after Periander, but Hermione caught him by the elbow. He thought she would tell him to be careful and not get himself hurt, but her concerns were more pragmatic. "We're here for evidence! There's no point if we destroy it trying to catch him! Don't set anything on fire!"

"He's going to get away," Luna gasped, and Hermione looked at them grimly.

"Luna, stay out front. Draco, go around the back. I'm going inside." When Draco opened his mouth to protest, she was fierce in her conviction. "You've been training us for something like this. I've learned *dark magic* for something like this! So trust me! And make sure he doesn't escape!"

Draco ran around the back of the cottage, worried his protectiveness might have already cost them a chance to catch the never-dead. He was more fearful with the deep snow he had to race through, the crunching icy pull of it dragging back on every step, and the presence in the backyard of, of all things, a sculpture garden. The eerie air of snow-masked decay to the place was laid fully bare in the buried gardens and barren trees, the statues of Greek gods and goddesses without arms or heads.

He looked down frantically for footprints that were not his own, glad Hermione had shown the sense of making him and Luna dress for heavy snow, and saw the white expanse seemed untouched but for him. He was glad Periander hadn't escaped, but fearful for the two names on his list he had willingly parted from- especially if Periander doubled back and tried to escape back out through the front door, against *Luna*...

He didn't have to worry long. With reflexes dulled by a month in bed, and going on a year without Quidditch, he only just managed to evade a flash of some wordless curse, likely worse than Stupefy this time. The statue might have been Aphrodite or Athena, for all the distinction that remained in the ivy-throttled stone he ducked behind, art wrecked completely by the explosion of shattered stone outwards. Draco fell just from the impact of stone against his front. Periander was relentless, hissing out Crucio and leaving a trail of dead flowers visible, with the snow the spell hit instead and burned away.

Periander hadn't seemed the Crucio kind, not that Draco had known him well before he 'died'. It seemed Draco's trick with the Sordespiro ritual had not been popular with the undead crowd.

Draco almost cast Lacarnum inflamari before he remembered Hermione's order about not burning anything important. Surely Periander himself qualified, especially if he had anything on his person- Draco couldn't keep hesitating, though. It was lucky he was younger and faster than Periander, as he took refuge behind a massive sphinx, and that met a similarly dire fate as the goddess. "Diffindo!" Draco shouted, severing the feet of what had to be Vulcan with his blacksmith's forge, and a headless trunk that could have been Demeter or Hera, or Zeus himself on a shapelier day. "Oppugno!"

Periander stumbled back as the statues began to come to life against him. It was like in the Fountain of Magical Brethren, except Draco felt more compunction destroying these sculptures, ruined as they were. Nor did he have the searing panicked fear of death he had against Bellatrix Lestrange, knowing Luna and Hermione would soon hear, and then it would be three against one- or at least he *thought*...

"Confringo!" screamed Periander, and the power blew the enchanted statues to bits. "CONFRINGO!" he shrieked again, and Draco had to throw up a hasty Protego and then Protego Horribilis. Periander willfully prolonged the spell. It strained mightily against Draco's shield, showing obvious familiarity with dueling.

"Aruspices mitte!" Periander yelled after, a sharp scythe instead of radiating pressure. It seemed that familiarity extended predictably to dark magic as well. And Periander didn't seem to have any more compunctions about ending Draco's existence than his mother's garden statues.

Draco cast Everte statum. It sent Periander crashing into the snow-filled remains of what must have once been a fountain. Indeed, there was ice enough frozen under the snow, making his fall harsher than expected. That attested that, up to recently, there had been running water. There were browned autumn leaves frozen in ice that shattered, as Periander evaded Draco's attempt to catch him with Incarcerous. Then the branches that had dropped those leaves fell too. Periander aimed at the sphinx and shot his next curse too high. Unless he meant to bring *down* branches on Draco, or even the tree itself.

"Serpensmorta!" Draco yelled, not thinking to cast wordlessly, but the curse still seemed to take Periander by surprise. Nor was he readied like Bellatrix had been to cast the counter-curse, even as he ended up in another fountain. Draco was ready to take one of his aunt's tricks and try to secure the ice around him as another bind, but he didn't have to. Periander was struggling and trying to spell the snakes off him before one constricted too much around his wand arm to raise it. Draco sent out a Stunner, and Periander let himself fall rather than be hit by it, collapsing prone on his back writhing in the melting snow and half-broken ice, while the long sinuous green snakes found their way to his throat.

Hermione cast her spell wordlessly, but Draco knew it was her, by the precise way the snakes around Periander stopped tightening, even as Periander kept moving. It took another Petrificus totalus, freezing Periander as well, to make apparent just how exacting she had become: the snakes had been her initial target, not the wizard. They both were laid prone and helpless now in their tableau of dying vines and twice-ruined stone in winter, the serpents binding Periander's limbs and extremities like a set of ropes. Draco was pleased with that state of affairs, but Hermione was not.

"They'll still choke him! Draco!"

Draco raised his wand to vanish the snakes, but Luna had been hiding behind Hermione, chin poking over the Gryffindor's shoulder. Now she darted forward and began to happily untangle the conjured snakes by hand.

"Don't make them disappear, they're such lovely snakes," Luna pleaded. At least she had the virtue of consistency. Draco smiled at her as he pocketed Periander's wand for himself, trying his best to tell Dantanian that he had truly no intent of ever using this one, no melting necessary.

"They'd be dangerous to any home-owners," Hermione began disapprovingly, but Luna shook her head. "And we don't know anything about their species or natural climate-"

"It's only forest around for kilometers and kilometers," Luna argued, and carefully carried each of the five once-vicious predators over the very edge of the property. For a moment, the dead man they had captured with them was forgotten, as Luna's bright red mittens stood out in the midday sun, around green lengths of scales and fearsome banks of snow. Finally, once Luna had them all where she wanted, Hermione undid her enchantment with a sigh, and they slithered away.

"Just as long," Draco said grimly, "As you don't let Periander off that easy." He looked around, grateful at the seclusion, which should leave them free to question Periander. That was, if Periander had no associates or accomplices nearby. Hermione had feared that, she admitted, which was why she'd called Luna to join her in the back.

"You seemed to have the duel handled, so we stayed out of the way," Luna said admiringly, as Hermione began to levitate the motionless body of Periander into his mother's cottage. "But Hermione said she would interfere if she thought you might kill him. Oh, I do want to learn that spell with the snakes!"

Draco was left to reflect on the incidental cruelty of that choice of Hermione's, Petrificus Totalus over Stupefy. It would be leaving Periander fully aware and helpless but to wait, as he had to watch Luna give priority to the conjured snakes first. One doubted he would be in superlative spirits once they let him speak again.

Hermione was erring on the side of caution with such, sitting Periander down in the parlor on one of the antique blue leather armchairs before casting a careful Incarcerous. Luna ran over and happily joined her in minute adjustments of the ropes, which proved a teaching moment for her. Hermione could be heard shrilly instructing their youngest Rat Thief that they would have to be especially careful not to cut off circulation given the man was already damp and cold- oh, wizarding children and their lack of *medical* tutelage- and no, they shouldn't follow the winding marks left by the snakes on Periander for where to bind him...

Draco was left in the sculpture garden, the talon wand almost seeming to purr displeased as he put it back in his pocket. He hadn't let loose any of the dams on its power, nor leaned into any spells, not like he would have thought he'd need to with the likes of the mysterious Periander. If the assessor could defeat or fake death, one would have thought him more accomplished in merely dueling, but it *had* been three-against-one, technically speaking.

Or maybe there was more to it. Some of the contents of Periander's tattered robes had spilled out once he was felled, standing out in the glare of sunshine on ice as small confusions of shadow. There were two such items. One was, Draco saw with a shiver, was a dagger, one that looked to have seen a fair number of years of use. At least the hilt looked all wrought metal, and no moonstone. The other was a Potion vial, which had shattered over the ice, and ran a murky brownish-yellow into the snow turning it the dull sheen of sludge on London streets. Draco leaned down to smell it, and then carefully scooped back up some of the potion into the vial, without touching it. It was contaminated, but this was not for use, but evidence. Even if he already had a fair idea of what it was.

"Frankenstein, are you ready?" Hermione called anxiously, and Draco came back, carefully handing her the vial.

"Fell out of his pocket," he told her, before deciding the ropes were secure enough, and signaling for her to wake their captive. She obeyed and heard his maddened snarl, but her attention went to the vial. Luna peered over and looked puzzled, but Hermione's keen brown eyes widened in recognition just from the smell, not even having to look. Periander's sharp violet gaze went from indignant to stricken at the sight of his captors' discovery and their understanding, and the guilt that Draco had felt was blissfully gone. He had to resist the urge to strike the man across the face, just because, as he asked his first person.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Pammaque Periander?"

"What?" said Luna, and then her face brightened. "Oh, it's Polyjuice, isn't it?" she said proudly, her excitement hilariously incongruous with the expression on the face of the imposter, a man halfway to the gallows already. "So it's not Periander. He is really dead? But what about his-"

Hermione held up a finger to her mouth, and Luna stopped. It was smart not to give the imposter any more information than necessary. Even though you would think that any fake worth the whistling would at least keep abreast of whether the man's body he was impersonating had been dug up- except he would have been the one to do that himself, wasn't he? Had that been the beginning of this undead farce? Except then-

"I didn't think you could make Polyjuice with a dead man's DNA," Hermione said skeptically, while a no-longer petrified 'Periander' stayed silent as the grave. "Would that mean Periander is still alive somewhere?"

"What if you made the potion and put the hair or whatever in it before they died?" Draco mused. "Hey, anything to add to the discussion?" he sniped, and kicked lightly at the leg of the chair. 'Periander' yelped as if he had just been the victim of an attempt at Sectumsempra, and earned Draco one of Hermione's withering looks.

"None of that, Draco, we're going to have a civil conversation with the man-"

"I brought Veritaserum," Luna said happily, producing from her pocket, "I stole it from my godcousin's stores! Sorry, Striker, but won't it be useful now! *And* Draco knows Legilimency. Do you hear that?" she enthused proudly to the imposter. "*And* my cousin's willing to torture for information if necessary! I don't know if you've heard, but he's got a good success rate..."

Periander did not break his silence, but his thawing face seemed to turn rather greener at the suggestion.

"If this is the graverobber," Hermione mused, "How did taking a dead body actually work?"

"There was genetic experimentation on the Perianders," Luna mused, "So maybe there are things possible with them that aren't with other wizards-"

"No, *he's* the one who'll be giving information," Draco drawled, "Not the other way around. And we don't even have to use magic to find out who he is. We just have to wait until the Polyjuice wears off. Hey, fake dead guy, is there a kettle in this dump? Dueling is thirsty work in the snow, even if your opponent doesn't put up much of a fight. And I rather fancy a cuppa."

Luna took him seriously, leaving him the Veritaserum before running off to investigate the amenities of the establishment. Hermione inspected the Veritaserum, finding it clear as water in its small vial, and looked troubled. Draco wasn't surprised, he found, that whether or not Severus had suspected or detected Luna's theft, he hadn't acted to stop it. He'd been giving Draco and Luna more dangerous potions for a few Christmases now- hard not to think of that with extreme nostalgia, however many parts of his past he could tell himself were just as dead as the Dark Mark that had once lived on his wrist. Not to mention, if he had yielded and answered Luna's questions about the dagger as easily as reported, he might be too guilty these days to deny them much of anything.

"I'd hope we wouldn't need to use Veritaserum," Hermione told the imposter earnestly. "I'm sorry things had to escalate to a duel, but I understand your reserve given your unusual situation. Hopefully now we can have a more constructive dialogue, and eventually let you loose from these precautionary restraints..."

Meanwhile, Draco was prowling about less circumspectly. It took him mere seconds to find a suspiciously secure-looking and non-dusty chest in one of the antique cabinets. He appeased the talon wand- or Dantanian, he tried to settle the nerves that rose in him at the thought it could be Dantanian fucking Noir himself who breezily unlocked the cabinet and then the chest for him. There were several carefully packed layers of Potions vials, dozens and dozens inside.

"More, prepared," Draco announced, bringing the chest for inspection, while Luna brought over the tea. Best not to get the contents of these two mixed up.

"Are you sure it's alright to drink the tea?" Hermione asked, and Luna made petulant whining noises until she turned to 'Periander'. "Would you mind taking a sip of this for us first?"

'Periander' spoke for the first time, in a voice that sounded like the man's, but a pettish vindictiveness in the tone that was audibly beneath him. "You've laced it with your purloined Veritaserum, haven't you, scheming Mudblood."

Draco had already raised his wand before Luna stepped in the way. "It is sweet how you won't let anyone speak ill of your friends," she said logically, "But we won't get much out of questioning a man who's got his tongue locked."

"Fine. Dracosanguis," Draco cast experimentally, and nothing at all seemed to happen. Everyone just elected to ignore his failed spell and carry on.

"We'll be able to administer the Veritaserum to you regardless," Hermione said logically. "A few drops is the most it will take, and we could hold your nose long enough for you to force your mouth open to breathe. Even landing drops on your tongue would involve sufficient absorption and mixture with saliva to induce the chemical reaction in your brain-"

"Put it in the tea, then," groused the imposter. "Anything to stop this bushy-haired creature from babbling any further about her Muggle 'science'." Odd, the intensity with which he seemed to eye Hermione, as if there was some more specific dislike than just for her blood. Hermione gave the other Rat Thieves a long-suffering but amused look. Luna poured four cups of tea, a rather bracing Darjeeling they likely all needed on this brisk afternoon after what one could only really call tantamount to a minor snowball fight. Then Draco added a few drops to one teacup, and the imposter let Hermione pour it into his mouth without protest.

"You're awfully cooperative," Draco observed suspiciously. "Are you an Occlumens?"

"Always left that," the imposter growled hatefully, "To your godfather."

"Draco! Luna!" Hermione pointed to the imposter's wrist, where a tattoo was slowly fading back onto pale unhealthy skin. Draco yanked up the long flared tatter of a sleeve and found that as had both thrilled and scared him, that was indeed the impression of the Dark Mark being formed again. They had themselves caught a Death Eater. "The Polyjuice is wearing off. Who," Hermione began, only for her hand to fly over her mouth when she saw where Draco's eyes had gone next.

"Is that the talon brand?" Luna breathed in shock, and reached down to poke the curved red mark, eternally fresh-looking, over the aged palm.

"That certainly narrows options," Draco said coldly, "Unless Dolores Umbridge has been *busy* since her sacking from Hogwarts-"

"He's cooperative because the Polyjuice is wearing off *now*," Hermione said bossily. "We just have to wait a second for-"

"Too long. Cauterizo!" he cast, and the brand came to life.

Their captive screamed bloody murder at once, trying to clutch at his bound hand with the other one. His eyes had begun to go unfocused and his face expressionless under the influence of the Veritaserum, in the slower working of the potion when ingested in diluted form. But the pain inflicted on him brought his features back to life, enough so that guilt did return at the sight of Pammaque Periander in pain, even if the real Periander could be dead.

"Stop being a baby about it," Draco complained. "You have no idea how much that would hurt you, if I was actually *trying*."

At least those features were changing- and not into anything more delicate and feminine, so the fear he hadn't known he had receded. It wasn't his mother he had just cast the same evil curse against, a curse he now suspected invented, or certainly caused and enjoyed, by the presence in his wand, whether Dantanian or Dementor. The two words weren't exactly totally different. But it wasn't Mother, and Father's brand had been burned off- no, it had appeared on the other hand, but still, it wasn't on the left anymore, and Sirius would have said something before sending curses at his own nephew and friends, and that left-

"See," Draco said calmly, "I'll do something that will *actually* hurt you." He lifted up the chest, making sure the imposter could see him in the process, and cast his most delicate Finestra. One by one, the ugly brown vials of Polyjuice shattered. The purple eyes, fast-fading to a dull and then drugged black, flashed in panic at the sight, even before Draco had gotten through all the rows, dropped the chest to the floor, and cast Incendio. "See? Doesn't that hurt worse?"

"I won't survive now," the man said, in that monotonous tone that either meant the Veritaserum was working properly, or else he was a far better actor than anything else so far today had evidenced. "I won't survive without that. This is the end for me. You've killed me."

The man was slender like Periander, but with a rather wispy, unkempt white beard, and similarly thinning and unwashed white hair that replaced the previous length and thickness of Periander's long black hair. His voice went from Periander's hyper-intelligent, crisp poshness to something more cringing and small-minded, with a very slight accent not from these shores.

Not that, once his unlovable face snapped finally back into place, he would have been mistakable as anyone but Igor Karkaroff, once headmaster of Durmstrang Institute, turned traitor on the run.

"Huh," Draco said, Vanishing the ashes of the destroyed Polyjuice. "I thought you were dead or something." Hermione and Luna gave him confused looks. "Come on, didn't it say in the paper this summer that he was dead?" Oh, wait, damn, that had been the blue loop. Draco had assumed the Death Eaters would once again catch and kill Karkaroff, and hadn't paid much mind to the subject. Apparently some change Draco had made allowed the man to survive at least a little longer. "You are Karkaroff?"

"Yes," Karkaroff said, close enough in shape and size to Periander that the ropes still held. Luna still leaned forward and wordlessly tightened them, face tense and nearly as pale as their captive's.

"Let's question him, then," Draco said, and waved a hand to the other two. "Hermione?"

Hermione stepped forward. "Professor Karkaroff, we need to know everything we can about Pammaque Periander. We're going to question you about that. I'll try to start at the beginning." It was sweet, to see Karkaroff have no choice but to listen to Hermione talk all she wanted, and answer obediently to her every question. This, the so-called 'ugly Mudblood' Karkaroff had scoffed disgusted at for having roused the interest of Viktor Krum.

"When did you first meet Pammaque Periander, and what was your relationship?" Hermione asked calmly, and Draco was grateful to her for taking this part on. He leaned over Luna's shoulder to watch her making notes, then got out his own parchment and cast a dictation charm, turning his quill to something like Rita Skeeter's for the moment. Although this was one of those ways that wizards liked to ignore that Muggles had it more efficient. If they'd had one, they could have just turned on a Muggle video camera or tape recorder.

"At Hogwarts," Karkaroff answered after a brief, vacantly eerie pause, and a long breath. "I attended Durmstrang, but I spent my sixth-year at Hogwarts doing research. Pammaque was a fifth-year. He was also interested in the Dark Arts. But I became interested in his family curse and its study, and he rebuffed me. He refused to associate with me until I went back to Durmstrang."

"Were you enemies then?" Hermione asked, and seemed to have to bite back another wave of questions. "What was the nature of your relationship?"

Karkaroff actually looked unsure, as if Veritaserum could not prompt honesty fully where the interrogated himself did not know the true answer. "I considered him a friend. I don't know if he reciprocated, or if he thought I was his enemy after we quarreled. But I was never his enemy. We didn't meet again or speak for many years, but I never thought he was my enemy. He never was."

"'Was'?" Draco said sharply.

"Professor Karkaroff," Hermione said with a frown, "Is Pammaque Periander dead? How do you know?"

"He is dead," Karkaroff said expressionlessly. "I watched him die slowly. I watched him die quickly in the end. I saw the light leave his eyes. It wasn't really there after Maledictum died, but it was fully gone that summer. He laid down and died of nothing I could see just like he said his bird had. He said it was because he was tied to Maledictum, and Maledictum had ingested poison." His eyes turned on Draco, and some spite almost shone through the haze of the potion. "He said it had been in an assessment ritual, from a snake you conjured and killed, because your wand was poisoned."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Draco said fiercely, unsympathetic, rubbing his hands together with a smile for the nervous Luna.

"When did you come back into contact with Mr. Periander?" Hermione asked. Karkaroff's eyes flickered, slow from the drug, a voice being pulled through sludge like boots in knee-deep snow.

"January. He sent an owl, asking for me to meet him in the Hogsmeade graveyard, in January of 1995. He said he had information on a Hogwarts student and he needed my help." Karkaroff's gaze had gone more unfocused, the monotone complete. "I knew the Perianders and their livelihood. I knew their magic and their family curse, from when we had been at Hogwarts together. And I had heard of him working with pureblood families. But I never dared to contact Pammaque after we parted. I knew it would be something grave, for him to abandon his pride, even after so many years. He explained what had happened to

Maledictum, showed me the grave, wept, and told me how you had cheated him. He said he had done a ritual called-"

"Hurry it up," Draco said, casting a nervous glance over to Luna. Hermione had heard the story of the Sordespiro ritual, but Luna hadn't, and generally the less dark magic stories they told Luna, the better. Even if she looked dreadfully fascinated all of a sudden. "What did he want from you?"

"I was at Hogwarts," Karkaroff recited blankly, "Near you, with your Potter in the Triwizard tournament. He wanted me to keep an eye on you."

"Why?" Hermione said, anxiety infecting her whole voice. "Because he feared Draco would be a threat to the school?"

"No," Karkaroff said flatly. "He feared the wand's threat to the Malfoy boy and his mind. But I hated the boy, so I showed him the talon brand, and that I refused to help with anything that would help Draco Malfoy." An expression almost threatened to show through, different than spite. "It wasn't the first time I let him down. Nor the last. It was nothing new to disappoint Pammaque."

"You cared about him," Luna marveled. "Didn't you?"

Hermione sighed, giving Luna a *shut-up* look, but Karkaroff answered, "Yes. I cared about Pammaque. I admired him. If he had asked for my help with his own condition, I would have given it. But he asked for help for the Malfoy boy, so I turned him away. I did not see him again at Hogwarts."

"How did you end up here at his mother's cottage, pretending to *be* him, then?" Hermione asked skeptically.

"When the Dark Lord came back to power," Karkaroff said mechanically, "I was afraid. I knew they would hunt me." He looked at Draco, as if thinking of Draco's family. "I didn't know what to do. I thought of Pammaque, after I had seen him in the graveyard. He was so intelligent, and so good at keeping secrets. I thought they would not trace our connection, because we attended different schools, the one meeting since school had been secret, and we never were what you could call friends. I got his address from the Ministry. I wanted to ask him to help me or hide me. But he was already near death.

"He was obsessed with the talon wand and its secrets. He wanted to know what killed his Maledictum and himself. He wanted to save the Malfoy boy from it, even though he had tricked and betrayed him. It was the last mystery he would solve, he said. The last case he would ever assess, before he joined Maledictum in the family graveyard. He let me hide in his home, and I told him everything I knew about Grindelwald."

Draco didn't realize he had been the one to gasp until three pairs of eyes fastened on him. "What?" he cried out fiercely, stalking to get in Karkaroff's face, as if intimidation was necessary anymore. "What did he tell you about him? About those connections? *Why did he want to know about GRINDELWALD*?"

"Draco, calm down," Luna said, hugging him from behind.

Hermione stepped between Draco and their captive again. Karkaroff was already trying to answer Draco's string of questions. "He said Grindelwald had made the wand. That he had followed a trail to New Zealand, and then to Ollivander's. He said if anyone knew the truth, it would be Grindelwald. And he said going after Grindelwald did give him the answers he wanted."

"Did he go to Nurmengard?" Draco blurted, and Hermione's shoulders went ramrod-tense. Luna's grip on his waist turned rather tighter.

"I don't know," Karkaroff answered flatly. "I don't think so. I told him I had been to Nurmengard when I was much younger, when he was still allowed guards and visitors. But he wanted to know where Grindelwald's old possessions would be kept, by the German or Austrian governments or Durmstrang. He said there had been a disaster in New Zealand, and that Grindelwald had gone to the scene of it and taken what he needed for the wand, and that he might have taken some other things from Cathedral Reserve as well. I knew where Grindelwald's things were, and told him the vault and how to get in. So he left for a few days and came back saying he had taken everything, and found what he needed to know. The only other evidence would be at Nurmengard itself, and he didn't have the strength to try and go *there*. He spent all his time at the Pensieve and reading fairytales, until he died."

"At the Pensieve," Hermione echoed. "Did he find a vial of Pensieve memories in Grindelwald's confiscated possessions?"

"Yes. But he wouldn't tell me what it was or let me see it. When he knew he was almost gone, he gave me orders. He had me put that vial in his ritual dagger's secret compartment, and write it in the will to be left to Draco Malfoy. He wanted the boy to have the answers."

"He still didn't let you see the memories, though?"

"No."

"And you obeyed that? Even after his death?"

"Yes."

"So you took care of his will and possessions? Did he leave you anything to do with the mystery? What did he leave you?"

"No," Karkaroff said, flat as a computer-generated voice. "He left me what he said would help me to survive. He made Polyjuice and made doses and doses for me to look like him. They would have lasted years more. And his mother had remarried and given him her old house as his property. He left that back to her in name, but in principle to me. I went there after his death."

"Then why didn't you *hide* his death?" Hermione marveled. "Why did you allow his body to lay there dead until Professor Snape found it?"

"That was what Pammaque said he wanted." Maybe Periander had thought his rotting body would leave some final clue for Draco.

"And why did you follow along with his will? Even leaving that dagger for Draco. You *hate* Draco, don't you?"

"Yes, I hate him. But it was what Pammaque said he wanted."

"And why the hell would you ever follow that?" Draco asked, skeptical as could be. It made no sense to pretend to be a dead man but allow his death to be known, even if you did intend to live in a hermitage situation, one Hermione had likened to some legend called Hansel and Gretel. "Why did *you* care what a dead man had wanted?"

"Because I cared for him," Karkaroff said just as expressionlessly, and went silent.

Citadelle Xaphan was bright and clear-skied and devoid of snow, in a March whose impending spring was far more resoundingly felt this far south. But for secrecy's sake, the Portkey Draco had made let them out not into the sunshine, but the inside of the library tower, past the secret House Black passage. It was still a risk that Severus might be there on a Saturday afternoon, but a part of Draco had gone back to that dangerous mode of thinking that Hermione had so lamented in him last year: the part that did not care for consequences at all, except in a sort of raw gallows humor about the ironies and coincidences in every human being's existence.

If Severus caught him sneaking a fugitive Death Eater into the Order's foremost stronghold against the Death Eaters, well, what had he and Dumbledore expected, when they kept information from Draco? This was still mild compared to the things Draco could have done. The things he probably *would* do, before this all was over.

He had warned Dumbledore, hadn't he? He'd told him, all the way back in November, that it wouldn't work, keeping Draco in the dark. He'd told him, "You can't control me, and you can't predict me either." He was succeeding, he thought, in being unpredictable, even if suicidally stupid. But unpredictable nonetheless. Even if there had been no deeper reason- even if there hadn't been Harry's fate and his nine names and Dantanian Noir and the Mirror of Ecidyrue shattering- that would have been satisfaction enough.

Hermione and Luna had stayed behind, with Hermione insistent on scouring the house for any books or evidence that could help, and Draco reluctant to leave Hermione alone. He'd left them a Portkey for two hours later that would take them to Hogsmeade, and he was sure if they fell in enough peril, Hermione would be desperate enough to use her Apparition lessons to get them out of there sooner. He was more uncertain about the reaction of Xaphan to his arrival.

Luckily enough, Severus was nowhere to be seen. Except in the Mirror of Erised. Karkaroff recoiled back in shock, enough of the Veritaserum gone out of his bound disarmed form for him to react indignantly. "Severus? You treacherous Malfoy scum! You told me you were taking me to a place of *safety*-"

"Okay," Draco sighed, looking between the two hopeless men he had now taken on as his charges. "Number one, Gilderoy, what are you doing? I told you not to spend time staring into that." Gilderoy squawked and quickly recovered the Mirror of Erised, before nervously fluffing at his long hair. "Number two, Karkaroff- no, I think I'll call you Igor- Igor, that was just an image. Not that Severus is as dangerous to you as my other family, and their friends. I told you, Citadelle Xaphan is the safest place on the planet for someone fleeing Death Eaters. You'll never find anything like these wards." Draco decided not to mention the successful attack on Sirius and Remus's wedding. It had, admittedly, shown them places where their security could improve. "The question is not whether you're *safe* here. The question is how long *I* will *allow* you to be."

"Ah," Gilderoy said nervously, eyeing Karkaroff with a valiant attempt at optimism. "What a lovely surprise, Draco. I do love it when you pop in unexpectedly. And you've brought me a guest!"

"Do you have any others?" Draco asked, and Gilderoy shook his head.

"They were all by," Gilderoy said, cautious enough not to say the names, "But they've gone."

"That- glass, or mirror, whatever it was," Karkaroff prodded, the Veritaserum definitely gone now from how he pulled at the ropes and squiggled and snarled. "Some communication device? Could Snape have seen me? Perhaps you believe him loyal to *your* side, but I wouldn't trust that man's *loyalty* with a loaf of bread, let alone my own life-"

Gilderoy drew himself up tall and proud, in what Draco was embarrassed to recognize was a decent impression of himself. "Severus Snape," Gilderoy said icily, "Is a man whose loyalty is unimpeachable. To speak ill of him in these walls is to request your own *speedy* dismissal from them."

Karkaroff's gaze focused on Gilderoy. "Huh. You look familiar." He squinted at Gilderoy doubtfully, which made Draco wonder how many newspapers he'd seen since Periander's death. "Aren't you that book writer? The adventurer? The fraud?

"My name is Gilderoy Lockhart, yes," Gilderoy said, chin tilted haughtily in what, yes, was the spitting image of Draco, "And I have since moved beyond the crimes associated with my name, and reside here in service, in service to my atonement. Pray tell, what of your crimes, Headmaster Karkaroff? Were you not a Death Eater, who once used the Imperius to make half-blood children beat their own mother? How have you *atoned* for that?"

"How... how could you know..." The blood all went right back out of Karkaroff's face. *Obviously from your old Death Eater pal Severus, you imbecile, which you could infer from the fact that you betrayed Severus so he wouldn't be too fond of you.* And *the man before you is one who just defended Severus like he once would have an autographed photo of himself. Nice to know you're this slow on the uptake.*

"I know many things," Gilderoy intoned mysteriously, and tossed his hair and posed.

"Gilderoy," Draco said with his best ingratiating smile, "Do you remember when you told me you would keep my secrets? Whatever they were? That your loyalties were unequivocally to

me?"

"Of course. You don't need to remind me."

The face Karkaroff made showed exactly what he thought of anyone who would swear unconditional loyalty to *Draco.*

"So," Draco said intently, "This here is a fugitive, Gilderoy. Both the Death Eaters *and* the Order of the Phoenix would want this man dead or alive. But you wouldn't be up on the politics surrounding him- you wouldn't have thought the need, as the man himself is clearly insignificant- oh, shut it, make all the noises you want now, I dueled you and didn't even break a *sweat*, Headmaster of *Durmstrang* my *arse*-"

"You *dueled*?" Gilderoy gasped. "Oh, no, Draco, are you alright?" Gilderoy looked more serious for a moment, then seemed to glean the state of affairs had turned out quite well for his side, and went cheery again. "Ah, shall I erase his memories of ever seeing you, then?" he said lightly, and a bound Karkaroff tried abruptly to make a run for it. Draco laughed and lazily waved his wand, sending some of the ropes around Karkaroff's arms and waist coiling to attach him to the nearest musty old bookshelf. "It wouldn't be a bother," Gilderoy said earnestly, looking excited at the thought of an opportunity to be useful again. "No, not a bother at all-"

"Much as I indeed would enjoy witnessing you wipe him clean as a *slate*," Draco laughed, "There are far too many important things in his head. Things I'm going to want him to remember."

"Very well, then," Gilderoy said, undaunted. "Shall we find a cell for him somewhere or other? Xaphan's full of them, the question's just where none of the Order would ever see him- I suppose I could take the paintings out of that room-"

Draco did not even want to look at Dantanian's paintings. Nor would that be safe from Severus. "No, Gilderoy, that would take quite a great deal of effort on our part," he drawled, making sure Karkaroff was catching every insinuation. "And I only go to effort on behalf of my *friends*, don't I?"

Draco had, in fact, been Gilderoy's benefactor this past year, at a time when their most significant interaction to date had been Vanishing Draco's bones. But Gilderoy nodded all the same, quite enthusiastically. "Oh, yes, Draco has many friends. He can't go out of his way for just anyone. You've got to be special," he said, and preened again. He looked like he wished he had his blue fur on, to fluff and look even more special.

"Then let me go," Karkaroff growled. "I gave you the information you wanted." He said it as if it had been some gracious concession, rather than the fruit of Veritaserum. Seemed that all that time pretending to be his dead friend had somehow failed to dent, if not Karkaroff's heart, at least his ego. "Take me out of here and leave me be. I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" Draco asked nonchalantly. He took Karkaroff's wand from his pocket and twirled it in the air. "Now that you don't have any Polyjuice left?" That was a happy coincidence.

"*And* there's been a new trail to you, left by two of the Dark Lord's three most hated wizards on the planet?"

"Two?" Karkaroff frowned, clearly not up to date either. Well, if Karkaroff didn't know Luna was important, Draco wasn't about to tell him.

"So if you want to go it alone," Draco drawled, "*Without* a wand... see, I've taken rather a liking to this one... you can, Igor. But I don't know how realistic it is, to imagine you'd survive longer than a few weeks. Should we place bets, Gilderoy, on how long it would take Fenrir Greyback to track him now? Or is that too obvious?"

"Maybe," Gilderoy said with that unimpeachable cheerfulness, catching Draco's drift, "It should be on how many times that Lestrange woman tortures you. Although I don't know how we could *know* about that..."

"Severus is a spy, he could ask her," Draco said placidly, then raised a hand facetiously to his mouth as if he'd let it slip by accident. "Oh, no, wait, now that you know that, Igor, I *definitely* can't let you fall in the hands of the Death Eaters like that. I'd have to have Gilderoy Obliviate our entire meeting away from you. You'd be on the run disarmed, undisguised, and hunted with new verve again, not even knowing why..."

"Please!" Karkaroff exclaimed suddenly, worn down to the point where his ego yielded. "Please, Draco, let me stay here. Let me stay at Citadelle Xaphan, where I'll be safe from- from your *aunt*..."

"You know you'd be luckier," Draco said expressionlessly, "If the Dark Lord has his way with you and kills you first, than if you're first in the hands of my charming and hospitable Aunt Bella."

Karkaroff shuddered, but did not contradict him. "Please. Please, Malfoy-"

"Black," Gilderoy said, and Karkaroff glared at him, seeming to have taken an instant dislike to Gilderoy. Predictably.

"What?"

"His name's been changed. It's Draco Lupin Black now," Gilderoy said proudly.

"Fine!" Karkaroff hissed savagely. "Please, *Black*, let me stay here-"

"No," Draco said flatly. "Absolutely not. If you want a place here, you have to earn it."

"How?" Karkaroff asked eagerly. For a moment, he looked almost happy, like he thought he'd inadvertently hit the jackpot. With Periander gone, he might look to Draco as another potential protector. That was the nature of so many Death Eaters. Always looking for someone more powerful to hide behind like a coward, so they could deny they weren't powerful and deny they were cowards.

"Don't you wish you knew," Draco said in a superior tone, throwing Karkaroff's wand in the air and catching it. "That's up to me. It's all up to me. I make the rules now. Do you remember

when we first met?" *In the red line.* "Do you remember when I was sleeping, and you were feeling at the wounds on my back? Not the best first impression-"

"You touched a sleeping child in his bed?" Gilderoy gasped, appalled.

"I was trying to see if his wounds were real, and how bad they were, nothing more," Karkaroff snapped. "Because if his father had truly beaten him, that would mean the rumors about him at the Quidditch World Cup were *true.* And I feared him as a potential Triwizard competitor, age rules or no. I have no interest beyond that in *children*."

"I might actually believe him, you know," Draco said, trying to quickly distract Gilderoy from all the potential pieces of information contained in that denial. "His tastes seem to have ran rather to the older male- the long-haired slender light-eyed sort, Ravenclaw to boot, so really, Gilderoy, I think not me but *you* would have something to fear on that account-"

"I would sooner couple with a porpoise!" Karkaroff exclaimed in his most thorough outrage of the day.

"*Anyway*," Draco stressed, "I have no liking or ties to you, Igor, so you don't get to stay here. But I won't cast you to the wolves either. I'll find somewhere else to hide you from everyone, until you have the chance to prove yourself to me."

"Where?" Karkaroff demanded anxiously, and yeah, that was the one part of this Draco hadn't really thought through as much.

"Somewhere no one would find you," Draco said loftily, "And no one would think to *look* for you." Absurdly, what came to mind was Dantanian's hoard, hollowed into a cliff's edge, where he'd left Lamia the moonstones and, presumably, the Mirror of Erised. Although if she had moved to Malfoy Manor with Dorian, it could be the other way around. He didn't know if he could Apparate or make a Portkey, though, to somewhere of unknown place- a Pensieve memory from a century ago...

"You do have a place," Karkaroff prompted, and Gilderoy made a small, muted sound. When Draco looked his way, the optimistic bustle and sunshine had gone from him as if it had never been at all.

"We do. If there's no others. We have to get him out of here, don't we, before Severus comes to check in. He always does, tomorrow morning. So we don't have time to scout, or try and set something up, or-" He turned to Draco with a pleading in his gaze. For what, Draco could not say. "He- he is important to you? What you need? You truly need him safe?" It was like he was begging Draco to just discard Karkaroff, sooner than offer up this place.

"I do," Draco said honestly, and Gilderoy took a deep breath.

"Very well," he said briskly. "I can Side-Along you both there. Just- not so far. Draco can make Portkeys," he told an outraged-looking Karkaroff. "If you don't mind. I'd just need you to make one to take us as far as- as Barcelona."

It was like stepping out of a mirage of an oasis, into the desiccated reality of a true desert, the difference in one instant. They were on the mountain of Tibidado, looking down at the lights of Barcelona. The sea beyond the city bound it on one side, and the mountains the other. They had arrived near a landmark Gilderoy had described to Draco in detail, a wizarding restaurant that sold a specialty of that mountain part of the famous city, the calçots just starting to come into season in this far warmer part of the world. They'd broken into the back, leaving handfuls of Galleons, and watched Karkaroff seize the hanging, huge burned onions, and devour them like they would be his last meal. It was hard not to think it indeed might be, after they had all eaten their illegal fill, and Gilderoy seized both their hands, and took them out of the mirage and into the desert.

From the pictures in the papers, Draco had expected it to be smaller, maybe around the dimensions of Malfoy Manor. It had certainly looked smaller in height than the likes of Hogwarts, with its collapsed towers of mountain stone, the eroded tan and charcoal color making it blend into the jagged peak right above it. But it sprawled out as far as the eye could see, despite the damage of centuries and then much more recently. Much of the castle seemed to have been built and hollowed into the side of the mountain, the original stone directly carved into rooms and floors and small towers.

Newly-felled towers that must have been taller lay in great shadowed stacks of stone under the rising moonlight. That must be what gave the illusion that the ruins went on forever. You could only make out hints, between these great leaning piles, of the great altitude and the steep view down, the piercing blue of surrounding lakes, or even the fading purple-dusk sky, filling each time you looked it with more unsettlingly clear stars.

"What is this place?" Karkaroff finally breathed, while Draco and Gilderoy stayed silent. Draco had thought of this, when Gilderoy said Barcelona, but he hadn't been sure Gilderoy could really bring himself to do it. From Gilderoy's shaking hands as he put his wand away, it didn't seem like he'd been any surer in himself either.

"I'll test," Gilderoy said simply, "To see if the wards are still intact. The question is if the gargoyles still obey me." He lifted his wand, called out a fast incomprehensible stream of what could have been Catalan or Korean, and got no response. So he walked further away from them, on hard unpaved stone covered in pebbles, bones, and ashes.

"What is this?" Karkaroff demanded again.

"The Pic de L'Infern," Draco answered automatically, remembering the article. "It's in the Pyrenees. The Spanish Pyrenees," he added, at the bound and tired Karkaroff's face of growing despair. He seemed unwilling to ask any of the obvious questions, beginning with, *Why in the name of Merlin have you taken me of all the random places in this world to* Spain?

"What is this castle?" Karkaroff just asked, twitching, as they watched Gilderoy's slight form retreating further.

"Castell de L'Infern, of course," Draco said impatiently, "The castle at L'Infern, it isn't advanced Arithmancy, listen, I'll be right back. But I just have to make sure Gilderoy-"

When he waved his wand and bound Karkaroff's ropes to the most intact nearby pillar he could find, Karkaroff didn't protest that. He just called after Draco, "L'Infern?" as his last question.

Maybe he'd already guessed by the near-cognate, but his face still went satisfyingly slack and open-mouthed, when Draco turned to call back, "Hell, obviously!" Then he ran after Gilderoy.

If this was a desert, then he found Gilderoy in what must qualify after all as an oasis. It was Biblical too, but in a more Edenic sense: an enchanted garden, blooming in the freezing wind that haunted the skies here, almost 3000 meters above the sea. There was even a warmth coming from the ground, of a kind, even if it was patently insufficient. Gilderoy had brought his blue fur, but he still shivered as the wind whipped at the fruit and palm trees, mango and orange and lemon, with vegetables and herbs in great patches in a spiral. Everything was a circle, a path of dazzlingly emerald grass between each part of the impossible little garden, where the wind tossed the branches above them but not one seemed to have ever fallen. There were enough different plants to live off, legumes of every variety and even bizarre luxuries that did not belong in this climate like coffee beans and cacao, surrounding a thick and impregnable-looking grove of hazelnut trees.

"Seguinus," Gilderoy said, from where he stood under those trees, with two dozen faceless, featureless gargoyle shapes flanking around the spiral garden like guardians, "Seguinus, he loved hazelnuts. We had to have cacao here, so he could have gianduja. Blood and gianduja."

"I take it you found your gargoyles," Draco said shakily, but didn't manage to make Gilderoy smile.

"They're so worn," Gilderoy sighed, "And so much fewer, but they still respond..."

"Too bad we can't import some to the Citadelle," Draco joked, "Give the Severus gargoyle some competition," and then gave up on joking entirely. "Gilderoy, I'm so, so sorry you had to come here-"

"The wards are intact," Gilderoy said, closing his eyes. He was not trembling at all anymore, nor was there any particular grief or fear in his voice, but desolation somehow resonated from him all about the garden and his gargoyle servants. "They've brought them back up for me. With Seguinus and all the rest dead, they've recognized *me* as the castle's owner? Can you believe that? I'm the lord of a castle! If you'd told me that when I was fifteen, I'd have fainted of happiness. Lord Lockhart. Lord of L'Infern."

When Draco opened his mouth again, guilt threatening his chest so much it felt it could clog and stop it, Gilderoy raised a hand. "The wards won't let anyone but me in *or* out of the castle. I don't know how the Bruixots de Sang breached it before, but anything short of that won't make a dent. Oh, and you can go in and out as you like. I'm like, your, er, vassal lord! Right. So yes, this will keep Karkaroff in. And the garden... the plants will all regrow everything in a week, however much you take from them. If it's tended properly. I'll leave Karkaroff instructions. He won't starve. It was a great problem, you know, food for humans... the laws of transfiguration don't allow its conjuring, and then with the secrecy, and how high it is... letting anyone in or out to bring it, the garden was..."

"Was that one of your duties?" Draco asked tentatively. "When you lived here?" He didn't even want to think of listing any of Gilderoy's other 'duties' here.

"Yes," Gilderoy said with a strange look, "But it's gotten on fine without me, you see. In a way, it's disappointing. I wasn't- necessary here either."

"Gilderoy," Draco said intently, grabbing his shoulder, "You told the Bruixots where this place was. And they took those *towers* down. *You* brought down those towers."

"Yes," Gilderoy said, "I did," and tried to hide his face. Draco stepped forward and embraced him, and Gilderoy let out a shuddering sob.

"I just remembered Seguinus," Gilderoy gasped. "Under the hazelnut trees. So many times. So much. So many times, under those trees."

He cried for some time. But before the tears had left his face or voice, he recovered himself enough to ask, "Why is it you need Karkaroff so much?"

In other words, was this worth it, going back?

Draco owed him the truth. "I trust you, Gilderoy. I'll tell you. But you can't tell a soul. You really can't."

"I won't."

"He," Draco said with a smile, "Is my golden ticket, to..." He stopped when Gilderoy stopped crying fully, out of comical incomprehension. "No, that's a Muggle movie. Okay, hear me out. There's this fantastic chocolate factory, by a famous chocolatier, and you can win a golden ticket to go inside, and see its secrets. And a child gets one, a golden ticket, and goes inside. That's Karkaroff. He's my golden ticket."

"Not to a chocolate factory, I take it," Gilderoy said, with a shaky hint of a smile. Draco laughed and nodded. "To where, then?"

"To Nurmengard."

The Thieves of Xaphan

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco had forgotten to so much as ask about the match Gryffindor had played, while he was in his penitent hibernation phase. That didn't dent his credibility enough, though, to keep Harry from giving him his invisibility cloak upon his return.

Which was good, given the mission incumbent upon him for the rest of March. March might very well might be his last month ever at Hogwarts, because his actions over spring break were liable to get him expelled. If they even left a person *to* expel. Yes, these could well be the final days of Draco Black. He had to get his affairs in order. Starting with the people he was possibly leaving behind.

Millicent Bulstrode wasn't one of his nine names, but it was getting progressively harder to pretend he only cared about those nine people's fates. He had done little to help her since the abrupt breakup of the Kingsnakes. But he found himself making sure that even the little he had done was turning out for the good.

He didn't know if she and Ginny were still training together, let alone whether she retained her cautious ambition of playing professionally. He snuck out after curfew in the cloak regardless, to see with his own eyes what was becoming of the girl whose hopes he had so treacherously raised in fifth year, only to send them crashing down as swiftly as Cantankerous Nott.

When he approached the pitch, there was no sign of enterprising students soaring through the night sky, nor any rattling of Quaffles banging about against hoops or gloves. He feared for a moment that they were simply absent, and that he should have done even a modicum of investigation before tromping all the way out here at this ungodly hour. But then he got close enough to see that the Weasley and companion on show had done as Draco and his Weasley had used to do so many times, and were sitting together on the pitch talking instead of practicing. Ginny's red hair shone out distinctly in the night, with the larger shadow of Millie close beside, reclined back in a pose of surprising naturalness, hands braced behind herself as they both stared up at the night sky.

There was an intimacy to the scene, making Draco feel like an intruder, rather than just rationally knowing himself one. But he lingered to at least make sure the conversation was friendly.

It was and then some. "So is Theo still being sketch with Astoria?" Ginny was asking. From Millie's lack of offense at the question, it was not their first time gossiping. "Did he call her a

different name again?"

"What do you think? Sketch as all get-out. Some people are cut out to be someone's boyfriend, and some aren't. Theo is definitely the latter."

"Yeah, Dean was too," Ginny snorted. She pushed her hair out of her face and leaned closer to Millie, the moonlight illuminating her cute face and turning it delicate, almost like something from a storybook. "So you have strong opinions on that? What does it take to, er, be cut out to be someone's girlfriend, then?"

Millie rolled her eyes. "Depends on who you're asking. Plenty of blokes would say it takes a pretty face..." She gestured to Ginny's profile, indicating it as an example. "And a pretty mouth that doesn't talk too much." She pulled her hand back, indicating Ginny did not fit that criteria.

Ginny looked strangely annoyed. "You don't think I have nice lips?"

It took someone who grew up with Millie to see the slight embarrassment there, in her stiffening shoulders and exaggerated nonchalance. "I meant that you run your mouth too much, Weasley. I don't have any opinions on the quality of your lips."

"Ah," Ginny said, and gnawed on said lips. "Well, what would qualify someone to be *your* girlfriend, then?"

It was unclear what Draco should be shocked by: that Millie was apparently into girls, that Ginny Weasley somehow knew, or that Millie wasn't immediately verbally or *physically* eviscerating this fifth-year Gryffindor, for referencing it.

"Independently wealthy," Millie quipped, "So I wouldn't have to worry when my parents cut me off for having one. Otherwise, being around and interested when I'm a successful Keeper and can support us both. So, many years in the future, if ever." Millie flinched at Ginny's sad look. "What, don't look so pitying. I'm just a practical person."

"It won't be that long," Ginny said loyally, "Until you make it professional." Any doubt whether or not she had a vested interest vanished, once she trailed her fingers over the back of Millie's hand. Millie's eyes flicked up, startled. Ginny met her gaze, ruddy face flushing more deeply than from just the early spring wind whipping over them. "And don't say if. You're *going* to make it. You're too talented not to. The only one who could ever stop you is you, Millie."

"Careful," Millie said dryly, "You'll risk making me emotional. Are we going to practice tonight or what?" But she didn't pull her hand away.

That was enough spying. Any more and Draco would feel guilty. Eavesdropping, he would have said if asked, was the province of the craven and servile. Which was a pity, given the amount that ended up unfolding in his unofficial Last Month, either at Hogwarts or in the world of the living.

There was the first check-in with Severus and their trip to Xaphan, for starters. It was awkward setting foot in Severus's chambers, for the first time in more than a month. He'd never gone so long at Hogwarts not paying a visit there, even after that one time he blew up Severus's fireplace. He'd done that because he hadn't trusted Severus, back with that disastrous mess over Riddle's diary that seemed simple now, compared to what lay ahead. The memory made him scowl as he faced his godfather, wondering where that distrust had gone. He should never have stopped doubting a man who could fool *Voldemort.*

"Draco," Severus said, with suppressed emotion in his voice. "It is good to see you looking so well."

"Did Headmaster Dumbledore give you the Portkey to Xaphan already, sir?" Draco asked, engaging in his internal roleplay exercise where Severus was Flitwick to him, except less well-liked.

Severus's face darkened at that careful politeness. Indifference would hurt far more than hatred, after the number of years Draco had spent celebrating Severus's sheer presence as a privilege and miracle. Which made indifference all the more appropriate, then. Aside from the need not to arouse this very intelligent man's suspicions.

"Here it is," Severus said, and Draco took the other side of the teacup. They only had to wait a few seconds before they were whirled away on the scheduled visit.

Gilderoy seemed liable to wilt away spontaneously, once he felt the glacial air between his two visitors: an immaculately maintained impasse. He was ever the party caught in the middle. It was a tug-of-war of a sort. Severus was always quick on the uptake, but he seemed particularly sharp here. It was mere seconds before he seemed to gauge from tones of greeting that Draco had forgiven Gilderoy, the way he hadn't forgiven Severus.

So Severus took up demanding Gilderoy's help with the books in the library tower, which he was now flaunting his open study of, as often as Draco demanded consultation over the castle restoration. By the time their official visit ended, Gilderoy's baffled face looked like taffy pulled out too thin between them.

"Gilderoy," Severus said with unchallengeable command, "I'll stay to read a bit more, but I'll take Draco back first and come back."

So it hadn't been exaggerated, word of how much Severus hung around the library tower. Draco would have been entertained, speculating the extent to which it was not the library but the librarian posing an attraction, if he had not already decided Severus meant no more to him than any unlikable professor. And he had given up on caring about schoolwork whatsoever, the day he saw Dantanian's memories. Remus dragging him through some, or Hermione unhappily doing some for him, that didn't change that.

Nor did Severus cornering him once they returned, in his capacity as Defense professor. "Do not take this excursion, Draco," Severus cautioned, "As an excuse to forget your assignment. Now that you are back at Hogwarts, I expect all of your work in on time and in impeccable form. The essay tomorrow on Dementors is no exception."

Draco neatly dodged past and made his way into the dungeon labyrinth. He amused himself imagining poor Astoria somewhere, bemoaning her woes to Millie and Pansy over *Theodore Nott, heartbreaker extraordinaire*. He made the merest grunts in response to Severus. When Severus followed more, repeating the warning, and adding he would not be liberal in grading just because Draco was his godson, Draco kept walking. His teeth were gritted tight enough to risk a headache.

"Are you being serious right now? As if *I* need to write an essay on *Dementors.*"

"You are still a student at this school, and a member of my class- slow down!" Severus snapped, and Draco dodged his attempt to take his arm. "Do not become arrogant, assuming that because you are an advanced student, you have nothing left to learn-"

"Are you talking to me about *arrogance*? That's a laugh." Draco quickened his step.

"And you will not speak to me this way, Draco-"

"If you're speaking to me in the capacity of professor to student," Draco sniped, knowing himself childish but unable to stop, "Isn't it long past time you start calling me Mr. Black?"

He didn't have to turn to know the way made Severus's face harden. "I will never call you that name," he said icily. "The essay on Dementors, Draco, if you do not have a satisfactory effort to turn in-"

"What should I write it about?" Draco laughed stridently. He would have thrown his hands out, if he hadn't been making for the stairs up from the dungeons posthaste. "I have so much unique *expertise* on Dementors. Should it be about the way Dementors were first made? Or about known human beings who have been transformed into Dementors, and by whom? Yes, I should, I think that would make a fine presentation to read aloud to the class-"

"You are being," Severus sighed, "Unfair," and Draco wanted to curse the entire world, at the sound of that one single word.

"Or should it just be," Draco snarled, withdrawing the talon wand and holding it out in demonstration, "About how my *wand* is a Dementor?"

A startled noise drew both their attention. It was naturally the worst person in the world to have overheard, except perhaps for Theodore Nott, or Albus Dumbledore. Harry stood there with a parchment that must be the Marauder's Map in hand, with eyes as wide as an owl behind his glasses.

"Harry," Draco blurted, a half-dozen different lies coming to his lips at once. "What are you doing here?"

"Coming to find you," Harry said, tone and expression numb. "I... I knew you'd be back soon, from the visit. With your godfather. But... I should leave you to- to talk." When he turned to go, Draco ran after him. Severus didn't follow.

Draco caught up halfway up the steps to the Great Hall. He caught him against the wall of the landing, and it hit him with strange déjà vu, though he didn't think they had ever stood here together for long before. He was remembering Dorian and Dantanian.

"Harry, I don't know what you heard-"

"What did you mean?" Harry's eyes were at once both fearful for Draco and resentful of him. "Your wand's a *Dementor*?"

Draco forced himself to grin. "It's a figure of speech. It means it's a mystery, and that it's bad for me. Like that song I wrote about me being a Dementor for you- expecting your Patronum-"

"You're lying to me." Harry's gorgeous eyes went desperate behind that thin barrier of glass. "I know you said you'd have to lie, and keep secrets, but- what does *that* mean? That's *important*, it's about *you*- and you're fighting with your *godfather*? I've never heard you yell at him like that, even when he tried to turn Sirius in to the Ministry- what is going *on* with you, Draco, I don't understand you at all these days-"

"Kiss me," Draco pleaded, and for once, the invitation made Harry unhappy.

"I've told you," Harry said shakily, "*That* can't just fix everything."

"You'd really rather nag at me," Draco whined, "Than give me a kiss? When I thought you'd missed me so much when I was gone..."

"Of course I did," Harry said fiercely, and extracted Draco's hands from his shoulders, one by one. As always, he was never more radiant than when he was righteously furious. "Don't use that against me. Of course I missed you. But I *don't* want to kiss you if it means kissing a stranger."

"I'm not a stranger," Draco said miserably. "Harry, please, give me a break..."

"What did you mean," Harry said unflinchingly, green eyes seeing so unerringly through, to the mean, petty viciousness inside Draco. "What does it mean saying your wand is a Dementor?"

"It was just a metaphor," Draco said helplessly, and Harry shook Draco off and stalked up the stairs.

Draco looked between Harry's retreating figure and the steps down, which would lead towards the secret passage to Hogsmeade, towards where he could Apparate back to Xaphan. Up or down. Another crossroads, though one his reeling, distracted mind didn't seem to grasp. Upwards or downwards.

He went downwards.

He needn't have hurried. Hermione wasn't due to Apparate in with Luna for another half hour, nor was the timed Portkey he'd sent to L'Infern for Karkaroff for another forty-five minutes. He couldn't even plan with Gilderoy before the meeting, with him tied up with Severus. Draco was the eavesdropper on Severus and another then. He stood in the library tower in his invisibility cloak, trying to forget his argument with Harry, and trying to mentally will his godfather to go away.

Severus did not seem liable to go away anytime soon. Who else did he have to complain to about Draco? "Once he has made his mind up," he was ranting, "He is less movable than the whole of the citadel. Each and every stone." Gilderoy was perched on the arm of a recently installed armchair, watching Severus pace about with a colorful dismay.

"This is what I feared, exactly why I decided *not* to give him those memories! He has gone from a catatonic depression to- I do not even *know* what this mood of his is now! He is more likely to speak to you than me. Perhaps he does not feel the betrayal as deeply from you. Have *you* any idea of his current mind?"

Gilderoy, who knew Draco's real purposes, would have to be a good liar, his much-maligned skill on demand. "Severus," he said in a placating tone, sliding off the arm to put a tentative hand on Severus's sleeve. Severus's chest rose and fell, a harsh exhale, but he did not try to remove the hand. "He doesn't confide in me how he feels either. I worry about him too, believe me." That almost sounded a truth in service of a lie.

"I want the best for Draco too," Gilderoy went on earnestly. "And it does you credit, Severus, that you care so much about your godson and his welfare- does you great credit indeed, yes- but maybe, well, what he needs now is, er, some space? From you? Maybe?"

He gave his suggestion with the air of a child innocently presenting a stranger a lit grenade. But Severus seemed, wonder of wonders, to think about it. "Letting him spend a month in bed was not space enough?"

"That was, as you said," Gilderoy fumbled, "Not really *space*, per se- he's only just gotten back to real life- but, er, a Catalunya- Catalonia-"

Severus laughed, a genuine surprised bark, as his seething gaze lifted and softened. "Catalonia? I said *catatonic depression.* Is the word you're looking for *catatonia,* perhaps?"

"Right, er, that's what I said," Gilderoy said valiantly.

Severus smiled, that rare sight that made his snooping godson's heart feel lighter, even as he told himself all filial feeling there was dead and buried. "No, Gilderoy," he intoned dryly, "That is not, indeed, what you said." He tried to hold back another laugh and failed.

"I am glad," Gilderoy said loftily, "That my mistakes prove so amusing to you," and Severus was the one to take Gilderoy's arm then, that rare initiation of actual touch between Severus and any other living being. "I know well how stupid you think me-"

"No, no," Severus laughed, "You are not *claiming* to be an expert on psychology, the way you did on Defense. The things you brag of now, memory spells and castles, you really do know.

That is the difference." Gilderoy still had that sulky expression on, the one that made him look more innocent than he ever had as a Hogwarts professor. Severus regarded it with what an uninformed individual might suspect as fondness. "Really. Some ignorance can be charming, as it happens."

"Charming," Gilderoy repeated skeptically.

Severus tilted his head. "If one is willing to be taught."

Gilderoy's face changed. He looked up at Severus through his thick blond eyelashes, with a keenness of attention Severus must have been blind as a bat not to feel. "Are you offering to instruct me in something, Professor Snape?"

"Sadly, I am far too busy," Severus said dryly, seemingly deaf to any innuendo. "Much as you would undoubtedly benefit from my instruction."

Draco's face had gone very hot, by the time Severus finally left and he could emerge from under the cloak. "Why are you so red?" Gilderoy asked, and Draco just shook his head.

"So," Draco said, standing up formally. "I call to meeting this gathering of the thieves of Xaphan."

Hermione could not have looked more skeptical. "Is that supposed to be like the Rat Thieves, just with..." She looked over at Gilderoy and Karkaroff with scarcely-veiled dubiousness. "Our new associates?"

"Thieves of Xaphan," Luna said thoughtfully, "Oh, that's a terrible name. It makes it sound like we're about to rob *Xaphan*."

"I concur," added Karkaroff.

"Does anyone have a better idea for it, then?" Draco complained, already finding this motley crew troublesome- he almost thought cantankerous, but that word was unusable for him. "Yeah, didn't think so. Okay, come on, we're meeting at Xaphan, and we're plotting to rob Nurmengard. It's not advanced Arithmancy-"

"Just *rob* Nurmengard, though," Hermione said briskly. "Not to even lay *eyes* upon any of its inhabitants, *right*?"

"Of course not," Draco said breezily. "I just think Grindelwald has one of the mirrors I need, Dantanian's mirrors. If not more. And if Periander couldn't find them in the German Ministry's vaults..." He nodded towards Karkaroff. "That just leaves Nurmengard."

"And what if you can't find it?" Luna asked.

"You're telling me," Hermione said sharply, "You *wouldn't* go asking the conveniently located Prisoner of Nurmengard for assistance?"

"Of course not," Draco said confidently. "I'm not suicidal. Even as a disarmed, doddering old man, Grindelwald is still dangerous."

"You'd be right to be afraid," Karkaroff said darkly. Gilderoy made a scared noise that earned him a withering glare from the former headmaster. "Before I made my visit to Nurmengard- the *one* visit, so do not expect too much- I was warned thoroughly by no fewer than seven different Ministry employees, of Grindelwald's pernicious silver tongue. It is not his spells they feared, with wards on Nurmengard that blocked his magic, wards he himself designed for his own prisoners. It was his ability to talk anyone he met into helping him try and escape, given enough time with them. And they were *lucky,* if that was all he talked them into doing. There were assassination attempts traced to visits to Nurmengard- successful murders, even darker deeds. And I laughed it off, of course, but when I *did* meet him, I-"

He broke off abruptly, looking in the direction of the covered Mirror of Erised. "Are you certain we are not being observed? Last time I was here, I saw Severus in that mirror."

"What?" Gilderoy exclaimed, covering his face. "No you didn't!"

Gilderoy must be making the mistake of thinking Karkaroff had seen Gilderoy's own reflection of Severus. Draco had as well the first time, he'd been in such a rush. Now he was more curious. "Alright, let's see," said Draco, feeling rather unduly sadistic towards his new supposed ally, and gestured magnanimously. "By all means, check the mirror. Take a good look and tell us what you see." He was very glad he had told the Rat Thieves about the mirror theft and brought them around on it before this meeting.

Gilderoy made strangled throttled sounds, seeming finally to understand what Hermione and Luna already had, by their mortified glances to one another. Then Gilderoy looked warier, though surely he couldn't suspect romantic threat from *Karkaroff.*

And nor was there. "It is Severus!" Karkaroff exclaimed in alarm, jumping back. "He looks just as before, the same tattered robes- I see it now, he's in *Azkaban*! Why is he imprisoned? And there are Dementors! I thought they were gone from that wretched place!"

Draco's amusement fled. "Seriously? That's what you see in the Mirror of Erised, Igor? Severus Snape in *jail*? Talk about a meager internal life. Shouldn't you just wish him dead if you hate him that much?" When Karkaroff looked baffled, Hermione graciously explained the nature of the mirror. Once Karkaroff understood that his heart's deepest desire had been unmasked, he began to look cringingly nervous.

"Why do you hate him that much?" Luna asked, looking protective, although it didn't hold a candle, naturally, to the way Gilderoy was scowling. "More than anyone? Even Voldemort?"

Karkaroff flinched at the name like he always did. "I don't," he began to protest, but the nature of the mirror rendered that useless. He covered the mirror again, slumping back over to his seat dejectedly. Hermione gave Luna a squeeze of the hand, seeming to give needed reassurance that the hated mirror was not a threat any longer.

"He was my rival!" Karkaroff finally blurted. "I know he has- ties to you, Malfoy-"

"Black-"

"Has ties to you, but that's just another reason to hate the man! He disarmed me and humiliated me at Malfoy Manor, in your room! He threatened me on *my ship* to keep *your* curses and threats a secret! I have good reason to despise him! He sits by the Dark Lord's side in favor, secretly a traitor, while *I* am forced to hide like a craven!"

"You tried to get Snape put in Azkaban, telling the world he'd been a Death Eater," Hermione observed. "I guess it's not shocking for someone to wish one of their failures reversed."

"And I would try it again!" Karkaroff exclaimed remorselessly. "If I had the chance, I would not hesitate to kill the man! Arrogant, wretched, hideous, half-blood risen above his station-" He seemed to realize he was preaching to the wrong crowd. "But I would prefer he spend a lifetime in Azkaban instead, come to think of it. *With* all the Dementors. I spent some months in Azkaban before my trial."

"And it's worse than death," Draco finished with bitter knowledge. "Your heart's fucking desire is *worse than death* for my godfather."

It was mystifying, the intermittencies of the heart. Not an hour after rebuffing Severus and wishing him dead, he was now virtually ready to murder another in his defense.

Draco had worse things to worry about, than lack of understanding of himself. When in doubt, blame it on Dantanian.

"In any event," Draco summarized, "You are no doubt convinced that the mirror is not some spying device. Go on, tell us about your meeting with Grindelwald." It had been a helpful reminder, that however useful Karkaroff happened to potentially be, he was still unequivocally their enemy.

From the story Karkaroff told then, he'd been almost infatuated with the man, if not still bewitched. "Even the Dark Lord," Karkaroff said admiringly, "I have never heard speak like *him.* He was the most clever man I have ever met. He could turn anything you said around and make you laugh or scream or cry at a moment's notice. He could argue the sky green and the ocean red. And his charm- when he looked at you, it felt like you had just been gifted some of his power. Like you were being rewarded with his notice, even with him the one chained to a wall in a remote mountain cell."

"I think," Gilderoy scoffed, dislike for Karkaroff visible, "His sex appeal will have rather aged out of him by now-"

"It wasn't how he looked. It was his presence. His aura. His *voice.* He was already an old man then, but I still wanted to follow him. We only spoke once, and I-" Karkaroff looked sheepish, and wouldn't meet any of their gazes as he admitted, "I was full of dreams about the power he had, the power I could have if he rose back to what he had been and let me follow him, I- so, I- I offered to help him escape from Nurmengard."

Draco's eyes shot wide in hope. "Did you have a plan to breach the wards of Nurmengard? Did he?"

"No," Karkaroff said shamefacedly, "And he talked me down. He told me I was a bright, promising young man, and that without the power to change his situation, I should not throw my promise away upon a Pyrrhic gesture. He only asked that I return to see him again, to-" His embarrassment could not have been more complete, as he mumbled, "To help chip away a bit once more, at his lonesomeness. And to bring with me a newspaper."

"He had you wrapped around his finger that quickly," Hermione frowned, "And all he asked for was a *newspaper*?"

"If he *was* that clever," Gilderoy scoffed, "Surely he saw at a glance, this man would be of no more use than a paper boy."

Karkaroff seemed to instantly requite Gilderoy's dislike, turning and almost snarling. Luna interrupted first. "Did you return?"

"No," Karkaroff said, looking down once more. "I intended to. But before I could get Ministry permission again, I met a man called- called Tom Riddle."

"Okay," Draco said crisply. "So we've established Grindelwald's a good talker, very dangerous- don't worry, Hermione, I promise I won't go near him, whether I find the mirrors or not- and that while Igor irrationally despises my godfather, he has a hard-on for dark lords of all shapes and kinds. Cool cool. I was looking for more of the logistics, though, Igor." He tried not to laugh, saying that name over and over. Ignorant and xenophobic as it might be, to Draco's uneducated ears, 'Igor' sounded like the villain in some third-rate Gothic or vampire novel- and oh, that couldn't help Gilderoy's opinion of the man either.

"Logistics," Karkaroff said nervously. For a headmaster, he seemed very uneasy being the center of attention this long. Maybe he wasn't as confident when he wasn't allowed to beat any of the onlookers he liked. "There was a passage *inside* the mountain, these endless steps up and up, out into the center of the castle. They said the passage predated Grindelwald, it was why he'd chosen the location, but it's since been closed- ever since the decision was made that if Grindelwald kept on for decades more corrupting visitors, they just wouldn't allow him any more of them."

"What about guards?" Hermione asked logically.

It was objectively hard not to laugh when Karkaroff sighed, "They had to stop that too."

Draco could extrapolate, but Gilderoy needed it spelled out. "Why?"

Karkaroff sighed impatiently. "Because he kept corrupting the guards too."

"He sounds fascinating!" Luna waved her arms. "Oh, Draco, I would so *love* to meet him-"

"NO!" Draco, Hermione, and Gilderoy all blurted.

Luna shrunk back, pouting. "It was just a *suggestion*."

"No, it's just me going," Draco reminded her. "Yes, Viktor would probably let you come visit too- he liked you, the one time you met, and needless to say I think he'd be happy to welcome

Hermione too-"

"You will not bring *her,*" Karkaroff said darkly, "Anywhere back *near* that honest good pureblooded boy, after he had the good sense to escape from her clu-"

"Langlock," Draco cast lazily. Gilderoy covered his mouth when a rather porcine snort forced its way out of him. Meanwhile, Karkaroff began to wave his arms in incoherent outrage. As the only individual there without a wand, they were safe to ignore him.

"But it will be just me," Draco said. "It would attract too much attention, a group trip- especially the *three* of us, after our plot with Sirius. But *just* me, I think everyone- Dumbledore being the most important part of *everyone*- will somewhat buy that I'm just going to ransack the Munich university library like I say I am, for anything about the Hallows. It's how it has to be, if we don't want to be caught."

"As long as Frankenstein promises," Hermione cut in, "Not to go anywhere near Grindelwald."

Draco gave her the least sincere pinkie promise of all time. It was a Muggle way to double-promise something. They'd done it before over inconsequential matters. He still felt a pang over the lie, seeing the candlelight glint off her turquoise bracelet with so many charms he'd made her- including the Star of Ishtar, a.k.a Astarte, *god* damn *it, Dantanian*- and then more, at the thought it could be magically bonding somehow.

No. He had too much legitimately to fear without making up more.

"How does he eat," Gilderoy blurted suddenly, "Without any guards there? Have all the employees gone?"

Karkaroff gestured to his throat, glowering. Draco lifted the Langlock with a warning look. "Yes, they have," Karkaroff answered.

Gilderoy got that bizarre look on his handsome, once-vacant face that meant he was actually having a clever thought. "But there has to be some system to keep feeding him." He was clearly thinking of his travails feeding himself and prisoners at L'Infern. "Unless there's some storage he can visit, or a garden- he'd need liberty of movement-"

"No," Karkaroff said derisively. "He had to stay chained to the wall, all the time. It was written right into his prison sentence. They wouldn't deviate from that now. They're too scared of him."

"Then how?" Gilderoy frowned. "Unless there's some system or artifact I don't understand, to transport food in past the wards- but it's a mountain- and you can't *conjure* food from nothing... someone has to be going in and out of Nurmengard-"

"The orders were clear from the Ministry," Karkaroff interrupted. "No human visitors ever-"

"No human," Hermione echoed. "*Human*." Then her hand went to her mouth. "Oh. Oh, no."

"What? What's wrong?" Draco demanded.

"I think I've got an idea," Hermione said cautiously, "About how to get you into Nurmengard. But I'm not so sure if it wouldn't be better if I hadn't."

"What? What? What?" Luna cried out, rocking back and forth and bouncing in exhilaration. "Oh, Striker, tell us tell us!"

"Unless he's being fed entirely from supplies inside Xaphan," Hermione said grimly, "Then I might be wrong. Or I might still be right."

"*What*?" Luna whined, until Hermione caved from sheer annoyance.

"Fine!" she exclaimed. "Who can visit Xaphan anytime they want, without the wards stopping them? Whose Apparition works different than humans? Who might the wards let into Nurmengard- and who might be able to take Draco in with them?"

Gilderoy blinked rapidly. "Can Hippogriffs Apparate?"

Draco could understand why Severus had laughed so much before. He leaned over and hugged Gilderoy in unabashed fondness, grinning from ear to ear. "House elves!" he exclaimed, with the memory of a darker time at Malfoy Manor in the blue loop, a recollection that seemed a blessing now. As long as it didn't get Dobby killed again.

"You're right, Hermione! My best friend is always right! It's *house elves*!"

It was Monday that week, when Draco failed to turn in any sort of essay on Dementors, and Severus chewed him out in front of their entire Defense class. Draco just sat back and tapped his foot, though Harry's worried stare did give him pause. In the end, all Severus could do was give him detention, and all Harry could do was keep worrying. Draco skipped the detention, and put Harry on the back burner.

The second part was harder once his letter to Viktor paid dividends. He got a message back on Thursday, saying Viktor would be happy to have him. He'd mentioned the Munich library as a pretext, and Viktor had taken it as one, but for another secret purpose: attending the quarterfinal of the European Quidditch Cup. One of the fixtures was somehow featuring Viktor's Münchner Murmeltiere, who had made it through the round of sixteen on a hope, a prayer, and a few semi-illegal maneuvers on the part of the threadbare squad's famous Keeper.

It was the first-ever time reaching the quarters for the inglorious Munich Groundhogs, affectionately nicknamed the Schnauzenspitze, a team with nothing but a city in common with their 'FC Hollywood' Muggle counterpart Bayern. Instead, it was a real Quidditch FC Hollywood, the ever-glamorous and terrifying Panthères de Paris, whom the snout-nosed underdogs would be facing. It would be a long shot, and largely dependent on Viktor to counterbalance vast tactical, technical, and financial inferiority. But Viktor was hopeful, it turned out, and touched and thrilled one of his friends wanted to come support him.

It seemed Draco was the only person to have made any such offer. Poor Viktor didn't seem to have many friends, for an international Quidditch star.

It almost made Draco guilty, to sneak his way to Nurmengard under these false pretenses. But Viktor thought their Quidditch friendship from fourth year had been maintained, through Viktor's long-distance help with the Kingsnakes. And here was his old training partner returned, ready to pay back the favor, and *be there* to cheer him on, for the biggest club game of his career. Really, it would be wrong *not* to go to Munich under these circumstances. Especially since a heavy winter and scheduling mishaps had pushed back the first leg all the way to a single week before the second in Paris, allowing Draco to attend both.

That Viktor's club happened to be in Bavaria, not too far from Austria? That was just the kind of coincidence that indicated the universe *wanted* Draco to go to Nurmengard.

Try telling that to Harry. He was at first simply disbelieving, that after missing a month of life in bed, and being distant with his nominal boyfriend since his return, Draco would even consider skipping two weeks at home with him. Draco's response that he'd just visited Sirius and Remus at Grimmauld, so he didn't need to see them again so soon, was met by so much indignation, it was obvious Harry had expected Draco to think about spending time with *him.* Then Harry's opposition to the idea crystallized on a more concrete point.

"You won't be safe!" he hissed, and Draco looked around the Ravenclaw table nervously.

"I won't go anywhere but Viktor's flat and the university library," he whispered, "Except for the matches, and there will be plenty of security there, there's no way Voldemort would-"

"Oh, yeah!" Harry exclaimed, eyes flashing. "Because Death Eaters have no history of attacking *Quidditch events*-"

Draco clamped a hand over Harry's mouth. Harry seemed liable to try and bite it off, but it was sufficient to keep the raging down until they made it out of the Great Hall, and into the first empty classroom that Draco could spell silent and shut.

"If it's so unsafe, Harry," Draco said logically, "You probably shouldn't be screaming about it in front of the entire school," and Harry stepped away from him, crossing his arms unhappily.

"What is wrong with you?" Harry demanded, voice free to rise with Inmotus in place. "WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?"

Draco perched on the edge of a desk and tried to think his way out of a minefield. "Come on, Harry, cut me some slack, I've been having a rough few months-"

"You didn't show up to class, see anyone but Luna, or write me a single bloody *letter* back, for a *month*," Harry growled, "But you'll go off to Germany for weeks by yourself on a lark, to see a few *Quidditch matches*?"

"I had magical exhaustion-"

"EVERYONE KNOWS YOU WEREN'T SICK!"

Draco resigned himself to a fight, perhaps a historical one. It probably wasn't worth arguing that point. "Maybe it wasn't as bad physically as I said," he acknowledged. "But I was *sick*, Harry, just- in the head, okay? I really *couldn't* get myself out of bed, even when I tried. It was a catatonic depression- Remus wanted to send me to a Mind Healer-"

"You never tell me these things! And you never explain them, even if you do! What happened, Draco? What happened to you in the graveyard on Valentine's Day? What did you see inside that grave? If it made you that upset- if it made you hate your godfather now, when you've always been so devoted to him-"

"You've always hated my godfather, I don't know why you'd mind-"

"It's just another thing you won't tell me!" Harry looked close to tears. He was practically hugging himself, backed against the dusty wall, red and gold tie messily askew. "It's like since we started having sex, all the way, things have changed-"

"It's not that!"

"Then what is it? *Why* can't you tell me anything? Because of Dumbledore? Sirius told me you wrecked the painting he used to use to *communicate* with Dumbledore- they have to go through Dumbledore's *brother* now, and Dumbledore's brother *hates* him-"

"*Aberforth*?" Draco was surprised into a lack of circumspection. "I had no idea. I thought he'd sooner spit in his brother's face. What, is Dobby transmitting messages?" Dobby would soon be too busy with another task for that. "It wouldn't work face-to-face. Trust me, however much poor little Albus whines about it, Aberforth must be hating it more-"

"What do you have against Dumbledore?" Harry yelled, and Draco was silent. "How do you know Aberforth Dumbledore so well?" Draco was silent. "You think I don't notice these things? Everything you don't tell me? Why do you hate your *godfather* now?" Draco was silent. "And why are you so close instead with Lockhart? I saw you with Luna and that catalog, ordering him a whole new bloody *wardrobe*-"

"Harry, for Merlin's sake, if this is jealousy over *Gilderoy*-"

"It's not!" Harry groaned. "I know it's not like that with *him.* It's *Krum* I'd be more worried about making a move on you, in Munich." Draco opened his mouth to protest, but Harry was working up a head of steam. "*Lockhart* is just one of all the things this whole year you won't explain or tell me! Why did you interfere and get Lockhart put at Xaphan in the first place? Ron knows, but he won't tell me!" Draco shifted uncomfortably. "I bet you tell Hermione and Luna more than me too. Do they know *all* those things I don't? I bet they know why you're *really* skipping out on me to go to Munich, too!"

It was terrible, sitting here knowing himself in the wrong. It made it worse, how perfectly lovable and sweet and *unchanged* Harry was before him, here and now, when Draco had changed so much. Too much.

"What did I do wrong?" Harry gasped. "Why do you tell them these things and not me? It can't just be *Dumbledore.* I *wouldn't* tell on you to him about anything, why don't you get

that? I'd always be on your side if you let me." Draco was silent, and a tear slid down Harry's cheek. "*Why don't you trust me*?"

"I'm not going to fuck Viktor Krum," was all Draco could muster in response.

"That part doesn't even matter!" Harry gasped, taking off his glasses to wipe at his eyes angrily. Draco's chest ached, protectively riled, when the only person to punish for making Harry this upset was himself. "You don't get it! I can't go on like this. It messes so bad with my head. I hate myself all the time for not being good enough for you to trust me! But if I'm not, I'm not! And if this isn't working, then it isn't working-"

"I'm going to meet Grindelwald!"

Draco heard the words come, almost or perhaps *entirely* outside his own volition. They were blurted nonetheless, and once put into the world, they couldn't be taken back.

"*What*?"

"I am," Draco said, standing and going as close to Harry as he dared. The words felt like a single-handed destruction of the future, but he was saying them. "It's why I'm going to Munich. It's close to Austria, that's where he is, in his old prison, Nurmengard. I'm going to break into Nurmengard, and I'm going to go talk to Gellert Grindelwald."

Harry was the one silent then, and Draco could have read anything into that silence. Finally, Harry just breathed out again, "What?"

"Hermione and Luna, they *don't* know," Draco said, a waterfall spilling from his mouth that didn't seem able to stop rushing. "Well- they know about Nurmengard, they're part of the plan, but they think I'm just going there to rob him, they don't think I'm going to meet him too-"

"You're so full of it," Harry said quietly, eyes hopeless. "You're so full of shit."

"I'm not!" Draco yelped. Did Harry not *believe* him? He was reminded, funnily enough, of second year again, after the emergence of the Heir of Slytherin. Only now it was his guilt he was trying to persuade Harry of, instead of his innocence. Could they really have gotten that distant from each other once more? "I'm going to find *answers*. I've exhausted every other way."

"Right," Harry said sardonically. "And who else knows about this 'plan'?"

"Gilderoy," Draco admitted, and changed that once Harry looked more disbelieving. "Lockhart. Gilderoy Lockhart. Dobby. And, uh... Igor Karkaroff, so-"

"Karkaroff?" Harry exclaimed. "The old headmaster of *Durmstrang*? From the Triwizard Tournament?"

It seemed so outlandish and random a lie, choosing co-conspirator of all the possible names he could have chosen, that it had to patently be the truth, right? Except Harry didn't think that way.

"I'm trying to be honest now-"

"By telling me the stupidest lies you can think of? Are you *mocking* me? Who *are* you?"

Draco felt bewildered tears of his own threaten at the back of his eyes. "No, Harry, I swear, I'll swear on anything, I'll take Veritaserum- I mean, I know I'm an Occlumens, but I can take it anyway, or you can try and look in my head- I mean, I know you can't, but- Harry, just please, I'll tell you anything you want-"

Harry stared at him for long enough that Draco felt a surge of actual hope, that this was not the end of everything between them. "Why do you hate your godfather?"

Draco knew he shouldn't answer the way he did, but he told the unadorned truth.

"Because he lied to me."

Harry let out a strangled laugh and covered his face, stepping away. When Draco reached out, he evaded his hand. "I... I think I need some space."

"Wait, no," Draco tried, but with a wandless, wordless lift of his hand, Harry broke the barrier Draco had made for the classroom, and made for the door. The smell of his raw power was like no one else's, more intoxicating than ever before, now that he had taken it for granted and found it was about to slip through his fingers along with Harry's heart. "Don't go..."

"I need some space," Harry repeated bleakly, and left him.

It wasn't clear if it was a dumping, per se. But it did divide their friends into the two predictable groups, like the last fight between them had. Except this time Luna and Neville were a couple, as were Hermione and Ron, which made the split much less clean. It was hard to tell, given it was only four days before they would all be leaving for spring break, Harry back to their adopted family and Draco off to die some comically horrible death. When he told Hermione to go tell Harry he was telling the truth, she just shook her head.

"He didn't listen to me when I tried, Draco," she said gently. "He just thinks you're still lying to him, and getting me and Luna to. I do think he needs space."

"That's such a stupid lie," Draco groaned, covering his tear-swollen eyes and slumping down on their library table. He didn't care who saw him. "That's what Gilderoy told Severus, to get him off my back while we plotted. No one actually just 'needs space'. It means I've been an utter prat to him and he's had enough. He's through with me, isn't he?" He instinctively lowered his voice. "Should I just write to Viktor and cancel? If I don't go home to Grimmauld, does that mean I don't care enough and I'm giving up-"

"Draco," Hermione said firmly, "I mean it. He *needs space*. And the way to make him believe you weren't lying about Nurmengard is to *go*. You said it was more important than anything to get these mirrors. That everything depended on it. You said it was more than life or death, more important than *Voldemort.* Was that a lie?"

"No," Draco said miserably. "I need the three mirrors. And more- even more than that, Striker, I can't- can't let anyone else-"

"You can't let anyone else have them," Hermione finished.

"I can't let anyone else have Harry either," Draco whined. The memory of Ginny eyeing up Millie was sparse comfort. If Draco was counting on *Millie* to wise up and take Ginny out of the pool, he'd be an even bigger fool than he already was. "I can't let him think I don't care. I do. I do! I just-" Hermione gestured to lower his voice, and Draco wished he could just lower himself through the floor and disappear. "I just didn't want him to know about Dantanian. I didn't want him to think I'm a monster."

"He wouldn't have," Hermione said into his ear, utterly confident, "But you can't take it back. You're not broken up, so take him at his word and *give* him the space he asked for. Go to Nurmengard, Frankenstein, and when you bring back those mirrors to show him, he'll know you weren't lying anymore."

If I really find both *of them, he could find out a lot more than that. And so could you.*

"In the meantime," Hermione said crisply, "There's your disguise to think of."

It had been Ron's idea, naturally, always the one to think of practical things. It had been for the football matches, and the natural fear that going somewhere so public, away from Britain and all his friends, would be unnecessary exposure for Voldemort's nemesis par excellence. Space from Harry didn't mean Ron didn't count Draco his friend. The very day Harry and Draco fell out so spectacularly, Ron came to him with a very nervous suggestion.

At first, Draco thought the trepidation was on account of fearing Draco's wrath, about the Harry situation. It turned out he just feared it *because* of the suggestion.

"I think you should cut your hair," Ron said, and Draco's hands flew to his hair protectively. Ron's hands flew to his wand. "Or dye it! Wait, hear me out!"

"Harry loves my hair! Oh, what a great signal I still want to be with him, he asks for space and I get rid of his favorite physical feature of mine."

"Favorite?" Ron asked dubiously.

Draco flushed. "I don't know, second-favorite. Maybe, er, third. Can we get back to what's important here? *My hair*?"

"You know, you haven't changed that much," Ron mused fondly. He logically explained how the two legs made it a double risk, particularly if word of his presence in Munich made the Paris match an enticing target. Word was less likely to spread if Draco was less recognizable, and even just clueless onlookers *not* talking about Viktor Krum's new pale-haired friend would help that cause.

"I mean, you're right," Draco sulked. "I'll change up my wardrobe and all. But can't I wear a wig-" He wilted at Ron's look, having already suffered an explanation of how wigs could fly

off or be torn off, and how easily magic could change hair length or color back and forth. "It could *damage* my hair, though, Cannon, magic or not, even if it looks the same on the surface as before-"

"You could die, Frankenstein-"

"But my *hair*!"

Eventually, Draco caved. It felt the least he could do, once Luna picked up on the idea from Ron and declared herself unsalvageable with fright unless Draco agreed to this reasonable precaution. So Luna got her way, and Draco let her and Ron and Hermione do their worst disguising him. Ginny showed up with some expertise on long hair, which she admitted she'd often thought of coloring- much to Ron's outrage- before deciding against, to stay proud of her roots. Draco was torn between trying to come up with subtle ways to hint at the wonders of Slytherin lovers and Sapphic pleasures, and less subtle ways of demanding whether she still thought Harry Potter's eyes were as green as a fresh-pickled toad. But she was helpful nonetheless, and Draco ended Friday night with his hair gone from chin-length to all the way to the small of his back.

There was no help for it, forget about Death Eaters on his trail. Grindelwald might have researched Dantanian after finding those memories, and seen or even met Dorian Malfoy. Draco intended to lie and pretend to be a Muggleborn, and without chin-length white-blond hair and grey eyes, it would be far easier for an old man's memory not to spot the resemblance.

It still hurt, seeing Severus's face in the Great Hall Saturday morning, with the chin-length hair that Draco had outright admitted was inspired by him now gone. It must in isolation have seemed a further gesture of detachment, which Draco hadn't meant.

Severus must have seen the purpose, though, when Draco showed up to dinner that night with his hair darkened. It had been meant to be jet black, and was more of a dark brown no matter how Ginny tried, which they blamed on Draco's very pale natural hair. But the color was still *closer* to Severus than before, although it turned out Draco's hair had a natural wave to it at this length. In any event, it was clearly a disguise for anyone with eyes to see. Draco securing Muggle colored contacts dark would similarly make him look less like a godson, and more like a blood son, not that Severus would see that part. He'd buy them in Munich. Maybe Viktor would find it fun, helping Draco dress up as someone else, like a Ministry espionage novel. Or maybe Draco could just sneak off on his own, when Viktor was off preparing for his team's inevitable smashing by the Panthers.

It was enough of a disguise that even Theo didn't seem to recognize him that night, though Theo was quite distracted at the time. Astoria was making such a scene at the top of the steps to the dungeons, it seemed Draco might not be the first of the archenemies being dumped after all. Well, Draco would ask Ginny for the gossip on it later. He quickly walked off, after instinctually fitting himself into the front of the crowd to gawk. He'd done enough eavesdropping recently.

Harry recognized him. He'd stared the past few nights, though Draco had given him that space. Monday morning, with break starting, he lingered in the Great Hall, delaying going off to the Hogwarts Express, in order to ask about it.

"Hey," Harry said awkwardly, with that four days not speaking having already felt like years worth of unwanted distance. Draco drew Harry aside and cast Muffliato for them to talk unheard. "Ron says, er, that's a disguise..."

Draco followed Harry's eyes and gesture to the fall of now-raven hair. "Just to keep me safe. It'll be back to normal when break's over."

"You can do whatever you want with your hair," Harry said, an objectively laudable statement, and just about the last thing Draco wanted to hear out of those lips.

"Do I really look hideous like this?" Draco fretted, and Harry didn't smile. The loss of Harry's usual fond indulgence was a splash of ice to the face.

"You just look like a different person," Harry said, dropping his hand and his gaze. *A stranger.*

"You can touch if you want," Draco blurted, "My hair," and Harry's eyes shot right back up in shock.

"Ron said you have a Portkey to catch," he said fumblingly. "That you'll walk to Hogsmeade, and it will take you to Munich."

"Yeah," Draco said, wanting to scream at even the slightest pretense from Harry of *indifference.* "That doesn't mean I don't have a second. It's probably the only time my hair's ever going to be this long."

Harry reached on seeming impulse and ran two hands through Draco's hair, one on either side like he often did before cupping Draco's face. Just that half-touch made Draco's stomach clench with arousal and fear, before Harry's fingers swept lower, traveling longer than before to reach the ends. He pulled one of the curling parts that had formed on a dark wave forward, and stared at it in the light, before curling it around his finger.

Draco wanted to kiss Harry so bad he could have begged for it.

At the exact same time, he realized, *Oh, I do look like a different person.*

That's who I look like. Dantanian Noir.

Harry let go of Draco's hair quickly, as if waking from a dream. "You should go." He hesitated, eyes assessing again. "To Munich. To Nurmengard?"

"Yes," Draco said, "To Nurmengard," and Harry's face fell with disbelief and disappointment. He stepped back and walked away.

Draco squared his shoulders, waited for Harry to be gone from the Great Hall, then made his way towards the path to Hogsmeade.

He had a Portkey to Germany to use.

Kaktusblüte

Chapter Notes

Playlist

When Draco looked in the mirror, he didn't recognize his own reflection. It was as startling a departure as finding himself eleven years old again. He'd braided all his newly heavy long hair. When it was this long, just a ponytail still made it a hindrance. He had to assume he would need every convenience to duel or fight that he could get. The hair, its style, the eyes, the clothes, his practiced haughty posture and bearing, they all added to someone older than Draco's going-on-seventeen years, though not by as many as Draco may have hoped. It pushed him a few forward, though, past the look of a Hogwarts graduate, leading to right around to- well, to the twenty or so that Dantanian had been, in that last memory in New Zealand, naming Astaroth.

At least Harry had never seen those memories.

Viktor was the only one who knew him who'd seen the full transformation. He'd been enthusiastic at first about the prospect of disguising his friend. But when he saw the reality, it had sent him back into his characteristic gloom. "It is not good, that you have to change this much," he had sighed, "Just to come support me, my friend. I vould not recognize you on the street. If you are truly in this much danger from the Dark Lord, then perhaps you should not come to the match. I vould understand it."

Draco should have taken the out, objectively, but his narrow loyalty to his nine names was being tested more these days, and found increasingly wanting. He hadn't been able to bring himself to flake out on Viktor while still taking his hospitality, not with Viktor obviously lonely and isolated, even amongst his own teammates on the Münchner Murmeltiere. It felt too wrong to see it and do nothing to ease that, even for Viktor of all people, who he hadn't seen in years. He hadn't used to be this way at all. He didn't know if it was what Hermione would call his 'moral conscience', or just loyalty from too *many* personal attachments. But it had kept him at Viktor's side, for that trip to the guillotine that would assuredly be the home leg against the Panthers.

He had been rewarded for his loyalty by one of the happiest nights of his Quidditch life, excluding those old ruined days with the Kingsnakes. The Murmeltiere had defied all common sense and logic and won, by Viktor's shocking and relatively early Snitch catch. Even if the score had already been run up, enough that the match's final score came in at 160-110. On the night, it didn't seem to matter that they'd only be taking a +50 aggregate to Paris, and that Draco might not even make it there, if his plans for Easter Sunday came to fruition in the wrong way. He bought all the Murmeltiere merchandise he could find, for souvenirs he wasn't sure he'd ever get to give. He'd caroused deep into the night with Viktor and his

teammates, for once united with their superstar in the ecstasy of the great European upset. He'd even written Harry an ill-advised letter recapping Viktor's victory from the insider viewpoint, though for once, he was the one doubting he'd get any answer.

Viktor went off to see his family for Easter still slightly sluggish from all the celebration, even though the squad had been placed on a strict regimen to get them in tip-top shape for Paris. He'd offered to take Draco with him to Bulgaria, but Draco had invented a cousin in Paris who wanted Draco to spend Easter with her. So it was that Draco was said to be spending Easter Sunday with the purely apocryphal Lisette Malfoy, while trying to look as little like a Malfoy or ex-Malfoy as possible.

In any event, the stranger in the mirror was left alone, with all the research done in the Munich libraries for his cover that he could wish, and all of the fine details ironed out in brief visits from Dobby, who had been taking back and forth materials from Xaphan and L'Infern. He had to already be exhausted from so much Apparition, even if the workings of that for house elves were mysterious. He still arrived right on time in Draco's guest bedroom, popping in only to give a surprised little shriek, dodging out of sight before Draco could set eye on him properly.

"Dobby?" Draco called. "What's wrong?"

"Draco Black?" Dobby exhaled, and climbed back out of Draco's suitcase with a sheepish look on his face. "Dobby is sorry. Dobby did not recognize Draco Black."

"What, seriously?" Draco complained, trying not to roll his eyes at the friend who would be responsible for his survival in so many senses today. "You've been seeing me, like, everyday this break. What, did you think a stranger had showed up in my room?"

"Dobby had not seen Draco Black with his hair like- like that," Dobby said, walking around Draco in a wary inspection that made Draco feel like he had somehow taken Polyjuice. "Or in those clothes. Ah, Dobby is... er..."

Dobby was looking at Draco's chosen disguise with ill-disguised fear. In his guise as Muggleborn, Draco had taken care when shopping in Munich's Maximilianstrasse and Theatinerstrasse to cultivate the image of a Muggleborn of means: it would be more plausible for a rich Muggleborn to manage a feat like entering Nurmengard, and besides, Grindelwald seemed a man likely to respond at least subconsciously better to wealth of any kind than a visible lack of it.

Draco had ended up entirely in that past winter's McQueen collection, paying an arm and a leg for runway looks that seemed sufficiently intimidating. He was shielded from the soon-to-be Austrian winds by a now-ensorcelled warm military matador coat, with gold piping over black he'd chosen because it reminded him of what he'd made for Sirius's trial. He wore nothing but plain black elsewhere, to keep it from looking over the top, and the well-tailored black trousers and shirt and sweater and boots had combined for a look that read *potential Muggle underling for Grindelwald* as clearly as he could render it.

It had only been as he was checking out that he took a real look at the signs and materials around the store, and saw the collection had been called *Dante.*

"Draco Black is looking like Dantanian Noir."

Dobby had echoed Draco's thoughts. He subsequently backpedaled, protesting how Luna had practically *forced* him to watch the memories, since, *Oh, you're a part of this now too, Dobby, you deserve to understand what's at stake*. That let Draco drift off complacently, staring at himself. He really had thought he took more after his father's side than his mother's, that he was the spitting image of his father, but if you changed his coloring, he really was a Black. Well, a Black bastard...

Would it be the worst thing in the world, to be Dantanian Noir?

If it weren't for the vow to Hecate against House Black. Against Harry's house.

"Dobby, it's fine, I'm glad you know," Draco laughed, realizing he should put Dobby out of his misery. "She was right. You deserve to." He peered down at Dobby with a sudden rush of misgiving. "Did you think I was Noir's ghost? Dobby, do you- how do you think of me, now that you know the truth about me?"

"Dobby does not care about what Draco Black's ancestors have done," Dobby answered unfalteringly. "Dobby cares about what *Draco Black* has done. And Draco Black has been protecting Dobby and the people Dobby cares about, and was being Dobby's first friend, and-" Dobby looked almost choked up, that Draco would even question his faith. "Draco Black was suffering, bound to Lucius Malfoy, for years, just like Dobby. But Dobby and Draco Black are both free now. We are free, and we are choosing who we want to be."

"That's right," Draco said proudly, and reached down to squeeze Dobby's hand. At the feeling of contact with that webby, sweaty palm, a rush of misgiving more striking pulsed through him: *Here lies Dobby, a free elf.* But this wouldn't be like Malfoy Manor, nothing like the past. Harry wouldn't have to try and fail to save anyone in this cursed place. "I don't doubt you. I doubt you less than anyone, even Luna, because-" He found he did, and then he understood where his simple faith came from. "Back in my second year, Dobby, when everyone thought I might be the Heir of Slytherin, except for my godfather, and even he wasn't speaking to me- it was you, Dobby, you were the only friend I had in the entire world. Without you, I would have been completely alone."

Dobby smiled a bit sadly. "Draco Black was terrible at chess. Dobby wishes Dobby or Ron Weasley could teach Draco Black to be a good opponent again, but Draco Black is no good to play games with anymore."

It wasn't the best thought, heading into what he had to consider an interrogation, that he was indeed superlatively bad at chess. This would *be* a game of chess, in which, unlike Ron's game in first year, he could only hope to not end up the knight. He had faced up to worse than what awaited him in that great mountain fortress, if Dobby could get him in. It had been so much more frightening, for him *and* Dobby at the end of that bleak year, after the Chamber and Riddle and the Basilisk, to face up to Father. But they had, with Harry and Ron beside them. And here they were, the two of them, without them again.

Dobby seemed to notice Draco's disquiet. "Draco Black is much better at talking to people than chess," Dobby said optimistically. "Draco Black gives wonderful speeches."

Draco squeezed Dobby's hand again. "I miss the Kingsnakes too, Dobby. Have you ever considered trying to play Quidditch?" Dobby looked bewildered, then mortified. "Come on! That could be my way of thanking you for your help here! I can give you Quidditch lessons this summer!"

With infinite dubiousness, Dobby nodded.

I can't die today. I have to convince Harry I wasn't lying to him. And now I have to give Dobby these Quidditch lessons.

So don't just throw it all away, Draco Black. Not if you don't have to.

Don't be too *reckless.*

There were very few who would not have called both Draco and Dobby reckless, once they appeared in the Austrian Alps. They were amongst the tallest of them, a segment of the Glockner group of mountains magically shielded from Muggle notice long before Grindelwald's birth. Draco and Dobby had both technically been to Austria before, with Draco dragged on vacation to Vienna 'to see some culture', and Dobby accompanying the family. But neither had seen anything like this. There was no wizarding equivalent of skiing. Even if there had been, no one would be doing anything but mountain-climbing or black magic at these heights.

The Pic de L'Infern was the closest Draco had encountered, but that was of lighter stone, it had not been completely covered in snow at its height, and it had been mottled with glacier lakes, not full frozen *glaciers*. And, one had to concede, from the many maps Karkaroff had produced for them, it seemed that Nurmengard was at least a kilometer taller than L'Infern. No wonder he'd complained less about the altitude of his new hideout than its furniture. The mountain Dobby had taken them to was lower as well, with Nurmengard's great peak and its fortress rising into view before them like storm clouds massing and marring the remainder of the pure white sky.

The best description for either, at least at this distance, seemed only to be *sharp,* with one side of approach to the castle merely suicidally steep, while the side closer to them was a near-vertical drop, a gap of so much bare black stone before any trees or foliage dared attempt to attach, it was less like a mountain castle and more like Xaphan, cliff-like with the sheen of obsidian off barren smooth rock too tall and almost too evil-looking to be fully encased in white. There was no snow falling, but the air had that ice-crystal chill that seemed to promise it sooner or later, and the whipping of the wind made snow seem preferable to its cuts like ice blades. Nurmengard looked like a place, though, that snow itself would hesitate to settle on...

Draco stared in not so much awe as bleakness, the very scale of their daring suddenly a bad joke, in face of the dark place he had so lackadaisically proposed they invade. He had to make a joke aloud, to shake it off.

"Well, Karkaroff said there was a path there up *through* the mountain," Draco jibed, "And I was mad it had been sealed off, but look at that thing. If it was too narrow to just fly up- bloody hell, can you imagine how many *stairs* we'd have to climb?"

How did Voldemort get here in the blue loop? Wait, did he fly *or something? Merlin, what an unappetizing image in your head to die with.*

Dobby didn't respond. Draco suddenly realized Dobby was no better-prepared, for this piece of wintry hell, than the addition of an adorable puffy down coat and snow boots, both patterned in turquoise-pink paisley that bore the unmistakable mark of Luna. "Focillo," Draco cast, "Focillo, Focillo," and Dobby seemed grateful, but still shivered. With a shudder, Draco took off the medallion he'd bought in Munich's wizarding street market, a tight spiral of thermal amber and garnet that promised 'a hearth within the heart' in winter. It belonged around Dobby's neck.

"Draco Black is needing that!" Dobby protested, as Draco had known he would. Draco just took his arm to be Side-Alonged again.

"Neither of us will," Draco vowed, "Soon," and stared at the sinister summit and towers across the great divide, knowing the real courage in this enterprise as Dobby's. *That's what Gryffindors are.* He smiled at Dobby and closed his eyes, as another pop took them where fate willed.

When Draco opened his eyes, they were either inside Nurmengard, or Dobby had found another great decaying mountain castle with some of Albus Dumbledore's poorer prose plastered across the front. He picked himself up from the stone floor of the entrance, and against his own expectations, went out towards the cold. He pushed open the great eerie curving glass doors, so he could be sure, with direct eyes, those were the words at the gates.

"For the greater good," Dobby read, and pulled him in to stop letting in the cold. Not that there weren't cracks in the ceiling, with fallen rock visible in piles around ancient faceless suits of armor, armor shaped not for humans but some serpentine-looking beasts. Their reptilian snouts seemed to raise above the crushed masses of collapsed ceiling like they were sniffing out for prey.

Draco hoped that whatever protection was suppressing Grindelwald's magic, Piertotum Locomotor wasn't one of those pesky little spells that could sneak through a loophole.

Dobby's huge marble eyes had never been wider as he took in where they had dared to go.

"Dobby has fulfilled his promise to Draco Black. This is Nurmengard."

Draco nodded, stomach twisting with not excitement but dread. Had a part of him *not* wanted to make it here? To make the attempt and fail, so he could console himself he'd tried? Was this terrible paralyzing fear, so unlike the past few years in times of real danger, because of unfamiliarity? Or the foreboding of this place, so barren but for the stone and those armored beasts, or of the man that awaited them somewhere higher in this fortress so little defensible

against the cold? Or was it just that the truth about himself was something that he didn't actually *want* to know? Did some part of him- some part of Dantanian- know the truth would bring nothing but more destruction upon him, and want to protect him, every instinct in his body telling him to get out of here, even if it meant running right out over that sheer drop-

"We should be following the plan, Draco Black," Dobby said tentatively, having finished his own intimidated scanning of the area. Draco cast an instinctual Muffliato before getting out the rough floorplan Karkaroff had drawn up of Nurmengard. Karkaroff hadn't known the place with any great detail, but with consultation of various writings from Grindelwald's, visitors to Nurmengard over the years, and plans of castles with similar architecture, they had an idea where nearly everything was- other than the kitchen.

So Draco and Dobby went to the lowest empty space on the map, in search of that kitchen. It might hold the house elf they imagined there, doing his or her loneliest of tasks keeping Grindelwald alive day by day, all without likely being allowed to speak with or even see him. Better to have no contact with the elf, only Obliviating them if they popped in at an inopportune moment. Not just for security, but to keep Dobby from conceiving some humanitarian mission of liberating the help. Though if Grindelwald ended up dead somehow, and no longer in need of feeding, Draco would definitely consider it.

The look of the basements and ramped lower passages was of a grimness beyond even Draco's imagining. They were devoid of the Borgin and Burkes-style dark wizard trappings Draco had automatically imagined, dirty and dusty, and without any torches left in the rusting iron holders, the only light Draco's cautious Bluebell flame in hand. Feet were inevitably louder than they should have been here, impossible to avoid all the bones and skulls and decaying organic traces underfoot, which should rightly have only been upstairs where there were cells.

What was the most impressive was the presence of something organic remaining *alive*, or else the well-preserved dead- a great massed curling dark viridian-purple vine, clinging to ceilings or walls or floors of each segment of hall, and spiraling down with them. It started the thickness of Draco's two hands and quickly grew large enough around to swallow a hippogriff. Draco had to keep telling himself it wasn't a live snake or about to turn into one. Even though there were dark branch-like blemishes over parts of its surface like brittle papered-over veins.

When Draco accidentally brushed his elbow against one, his shriek was loud enough to rouse the dead. But not the snake, and with Muffliato in place, only Dobby could hear his cowardice.

He couldn't understand why he'd been scared going into the *Chamber of Secrets*. That place had been the bloody Ritz compared to this, and they'd *known* a Basilisk was what lay inside it, as its token monster. Now Draco could not decide whether the vine progressively taking up more of their walking space was a beast waiting for them to walk further into its trap, so it could constrict and devour them, or just a whimsical piece of interior decorating. He'd seen Vienna, after all. And Grindelwald *was* Austrian.

It proved to be functional, at least, when at last they reached a point where the vine completely blocked off the way forward. Dobby sent a burst of house elf magic out to disturb

it before Draco could stop him, but the thing didn't seem to even register the touch. "Oh," Draco said suddenly, "This is what Karkaroff meant, when he said they'd blocked the mountain passage off!"

Dobby nodded in agreement. "This has been the way up and down the mountain," he said solemnly, "But magic is keeping us from going further."

"Do you think the house elf is on the other side?"

"Perhaps. This could be a barrier that allows it to transport food through, but not him or herself," Dobby said thoughtfully, then snapped his fingers and conjured a piece of taffy. Another snap of his free hand, and it disappeared. "Dobby sent that past the vines," he said brightly, "Dobby can feel, though Dobby cannot see to check." Draco mock-scowled at him, some sense of control restored by even a merely structural discovery. "We is not needing to worry, then, from the elf."

Draco dragged him back the way they'd come, before that sad look forming on his face could solidify into any ambition to help. When they ascended, they found there was at least still considerable light outside the castle. His analog watch had already told him as much, clock hand ticking normally, to around 11:15 in the morning. But it didn't feel safe to trust even simple things here. Nor was it entirely safe to ever trust *time*.

"So." Draco drew a heavy sigh. "Looks like we know where we're going," and jerked his thumb upwards.

"Dobby has brought this for the climb," Dobby said brightly, and produced a small broomstick from his coat pocket, which his magic made swell swiftly into Draco's Firebolt. He'd known Viktor wouldn't have time to practice with him, given his own professional commitments, so he'd left it behind at Hogwarts, but here it was. "From Hermione Granger," he said solemnly, and bequeathed it to Draco like some solemn object.

Thank *fuck.* Bless Dobby and Hermione for accounting for their fearsome Frankenstein's also-fearsome laziness. Draco had already been mentally debating whether it was worth the risk of Splinching himself Apparating an unknown distance, or the risk of Anti-Apparition wards kicking in and possibly turning him into red snow, to avoid what would be a colossal climb. He might have ended up on the side of just taking the risk. He wasn't what he'd used to be, in cardiovascular terms, since he stopped playing Quidditch at Hogwarts... good enough, though, to ride a broom up. If they could find the way.

Their steps took them slowly into what looked to be the *real* entrance hall, as if the first entrance had just been a hallway. This vast dark chamber with its vaulted ceiling had far more of its stonework and adornment intact, with graceful arches entwining in a serpentine manner up high and over every possible entrance and exit. They reminded Draco of the vine in the lower tunnels, though these looked made of something more synthesized than photosynthesized. Some of the molding on them, which was likely mysterious ancient runes if you looked closer, definitely was done in some kind of enamel or even jewelling. If Draco had been some post-Hogwarts student doing a study on Nurmengard for posterity, and had time and leisure without limit, he would have been tempted to get as close as possible and painstakingly record every marking in his notebook. But he was not here to sightsee. The

only symbol of true meaning was the simple shape of the Deathly Hallows, not just visible on unburied reptilian suits of armor now, but embossed over every object in the hall: from the unlit floor candlelabras to the tapestries hanging by thin golden thread from the arches, from the display of a floors-high sculptural gathering of hundreds of chains to the massive ancient-looking stone basin at the room's center. Hallows, Hallows, Hallows. *Mirrors, mirrors, mirrors.*

Dobby offered to search the grounds for the other house elf, in case they could somehow come inside after all. Draco told him to be careful but agreed, mounting his broom with his heart going suddenly breakneck in anticipation for the meaning of that flight. He didn't have the strength to resist Dobby putting the pendant back around his neck. It would be a clear shot up, with that open ceiling, and staircases to hallways or rows of cells revolving around a set of open central landings. He still had to chug a fair amount of draught of peace to get himself to make the flight. Lucky he'd brought such a bucketload of the stuff, he'd had to cast a Featherlight charm on it to make the pockets of his stylish Muggle coat stop drooping.

"Be careful!" Draco called again towards Dobby's small retreating frame, and flew.

It was a last narrow staircase on foot, from the top landing to the tallest place in Nurmengard. Even flying rather than walking, Draco was rather exhausted by the time he reached it. So he checked his watch and leaned against the half-intact banister, musing absently over the comically excessive number of those armor things lining every landing on the way up, until he had his breath fully back. Then he withdrew a small compact, surveyed himself, wiped or spelled away any dirt or perspiration, and fixed his hair and clothes to perfection, before he made that last climb.

He didn't know why, but he'd pictured a bigger cell. Maybe that was Muggle influence there on him, with their penthouse apartments, and massive suites on the top floors of their hotels. It was nothing like a luxury suite. It was more like a tomb, with the bareness of the rust-gray stone mortar walls, and the narrow window that offered less of any view than a simple opportunity to torture its prisoner with even further cold. He'd taken off any vestige of humanity from himself as he looked in that mirror the last time, sent sympathy away, into a locked cell so far at the bottom of Nurmengard it could never climb this high again. Any sign of suffering represented a mere opportunity for him, in negotiation.

Not negotiation, interrogation, he told himself reflexively, but he found himself awed by the sheer asceticism of the room, there at the mountain's highest of summits. It put more strange, wrong reverence in him to see a hard straw bed without pillows, and a gray blanket so threadbare you could see the straw of the bed through it, than he would have had for plenitude. There was nothing else for the eye to gratify itself upon but a hook in the wall, with a small remnant of broken chain on it- no point chaining Grindelwald like another prisoner, when this fortress and its wards were all his cell- a bowl of half-eaten gruel, and an empty cup that must once have held water.

No wonder, then, with that bare and empty a space to live in for so many decades, these were the first words the Prisoner of Nurmengard ever spoke to Draco Black. "You are a sight for

sore eyes, kaktusblüte. But before *you* see *me*, you must promise not to judge me. My circumstances are a purgatory."

Draco turned and saw an old man sat in not the furthest corner of his cell, but the one closest to the door, slightly out of eye range when first emerging from the door. He'd removed the Muffliato, and the man must have heard his footsteps on the stair, but Draco hadn't cared. He'd thought, what could Grindelwald do?

Apparently, there was something: move himself at a moment's notice to a better vantage point, so he could see the intruder before they saw him first.

"Purgatory?" Draco echoed reflexively, and was dismayed at what he saw of the man who surely must be Grindelwald, with that canny reaction, and the distant resemblance to the oldest pictures Draco had seen of the man. He tossed his braid behind his back, and Grindelwald's eyes followed the motion like a cat following a new toy, starved of stimulation. "You wouldn't say hell?"

"Why would this be hell?" Grindelwald asked, sounding genuinely curious of Draco's answer. He was not as fearful or eager for real answers about Draco's presence, as one would have expected of anyone in his situation, but this was not just anyone. He already knew some information about Draco just by looking: his apparent age, his accent, his presumed ethnicity and country of origin, thus his presumed magic school, perhaps presumed temperament or sexuality or even blood. That was fine. In seconds, the prisoner had shown Draco perhaps the most key information of all: he was Grindelwald, and *Grindelwald is still Grindelwald*.

"Isolation," Draco said, gesturing around the small space. Isolation did not seem to have treated Grindelwald well, although he had aged remarkably well given the circumstances. Either there was some charm keeping his bald old head and face hairless, or else he was too ancient to grow hair there, which contributed to the initial impression of ghoulishness Draco had gotten.

Filthy with bare feet in his standard prisoner's robe of faded gray, his wrinkled face had clearly once been handsome. Something in its configuration still held the impression of sharpness, even an air of command. Like Dumbledore, he was more than a century old, and yet he in this hellhole looked younger than Dumbledore. It was like the terrible death of Ariana had started aging Dumbledore from its very moment on, while Grindelwald aged like a regular person with abnormally good genes. Cleaned up, Grindelwald would still look like someone you would listen to in the Wizengamot, like someone who could even do damage if let loose, given his magic had not been wounded or atrophied by lack of use or curses or these wards. Maybe he'd still make Dumbledore's cold hard heart flutter.

Grindelwald looked to have heard, but he was ignoring the proposition, as if long, *long* term solitary confinement wasn't usually considered one of the cruelest punishments imaginable- even Azkaban had guards, and of course Dementors, who added some interest to the place at least- and the likes of him could never be touched by such petty miseries. "What, that part's fine?" Draco said wryly, and sat himself against the wall that faced Grindelwald. It had the merit of letting him also stare right at the door, which he had closed behind him. "'Hell is other people'?"

"Sartre," Grindelwald said not long after, frown visible in his narrowing wrinkled brow.

That answered how good his memory was, at least on some things. "I wouldn't think you'd know a Muggle play. Or is it just the quotation?"

"No Exit," Grindelwald said smoothly, and Draco called to mind Karkaroff's warnings. "Do you believe from my reputation that I hate Muggles and all things Muggle? I know it's a common misconception."

Smug bastard, acting like he was here playing court, and wasn't inwardly desperately curious about his first visitor in what had to be so many years. Draco knew people like this weren't really as tough and impenetrable as their facade made them seem. He'd gotten that letter and even made *Dumbledore*, however briefly, drop that superior mask. "No, I know you were amenable to some Muggle inventions. Wagner. Genocide. Patisseries that sell sahneschnitte."

Grindelwald's gaze was so uncannily alive in that worn face, rapid calculation and assessment at a level Draco could only guess- probably one he could only dream of ever matching- all taking place behind that unperturbed surface. "Do you disapprove, then?" *What side are you on? Are you here to save me, kill me, or just for some adventurous sightseeing?*

"Of sahneschnitte?" Draco put a finger to his mouth to pretend to consider. "I approve of *every* kind of tart that exists. In the literal *and* metaphorical sense."

"You know," Grindelwald said patiently, "Of what I speak."

"Oh, right. Wagner? I mean, as opera goes, I do tend towards the more Sturm und Drang variant, but I'm also quite partial to Mozart. Call me unoriginal, but nothing beats the ending of Don Giovanni."

Grindelwald tilted his head, to regard him a bit more personally. "You are rather a brat, aren't you?" he concluded, with amusement in his voice.

"Genocide is as genocide does," Draco said, waving a hand flippantly. "Now, I think this place is rather too dusty for *my* delicate sinuses. I think I'm getting thirsty." He pulled out his wand and wordlessly summoned the cup and filled it with water.

He'd given up on the idea of hiding the talon wand fairly early in his personal planning process, since he couldn't use any other, and didn't need to have not using magic as another thing to think about. And Grindelwald shouldn't be able to know just by looking what it was. Even if his gaze did stay on the wand and not the water. Once Draco had lifted the cup to his lips and emptied it, Grindelwald's eyes returned resentfully to it finally.

"Quite the brat," Grindelwald said, with less humor in his voice.

"Legilimens!" Draco cast, and drove forward with all his might to try and pierce Grindelwald's mind. Just as he feared, it was useless. It was like trying to get past that vine in the basements, it was so thoroughly blocked, not by a stone wall but something dark and unknown. He tried to look into the abyss, and the abyss tried and failed to look back into him. Grindelwald's attempts at a retaliatory piece of Legilimency were no more successful, and

they were forced to both retreat. Draco dearly, dearly hoped that Legilimency was a bit of magic unique in remaining for Grindelwald, and that he had not just made the worst mistake of his life.

There went any chance of just extracting the answers he needed. An Occlumens that strong would make Veritaserum useless as well, though he had a vial of it in his pocket. He didn't know if threats of violence or torture would be very effective on Grindelwald. They certainly hadn't worked for Voldemort in the blue loop. No, it really would have to go from an interrogation, to a negotiation.

"You are," Grindelwald said with open admiration, "Quite the Occlumens for your young age. Though you are a rude young man, to drink that water before me and not offer any."

"But is this a cup," Draco said facetiously, raising it to examine it, "Worthy of the Great Gellert Grindelwald? No, I could never serve you with this, not even if it held the finest wine."

"The house elf," Grindelwald said thinly, "Never sends me enough water." His lips looked very chapped and dry from the cold. "I would drink it if you poured it on the ground."

"No, that's not worthy of you," Draco drawled.

Grindelwald looked irritated now, which was good to see. More human of him. He already seemed a more formidable man at root to Draco than Dumbledore ever had, but here, Draco had so much more of any knowledge or leverage or power all on his side. If he couldn't get what he needed out of Grindelwald regardless of that, he didn't deserve to know.

"Ah," Grindelwald sighed. "You will only give me the best, which I presume also means you will give me nothing. If I can only drink from the finest glass, then..."

His voice trailed off as Draco raised his wand and held it over the empty glass. Then, carefully, he wordlessly cast Pyritaverum. He was resolved to do everything wordlessly in front of Grindelwald, since saying spells aloud might make him seem more of a schoolchild. After only one extra casting, he had the entire cup turned to the appearance of gold. He used so many years of practicing delicate transfiguration to reshape the cup to a glass like a wine goblet, and then carved the symbol of the Deathly Hallows into it. Finally, he cast Geminio, and took a glass for himself, before offering the original to Grindelwald.

"So," Grindelwald said, not taking the glass. "You wish for me to know that you are powerful."

"So," Draco said, imitating his lofty, stiff tone. "You *wish for me to know* that you are thirsty."

Grindelwald started to laugh, a sound that seemed to surprise the man himself, pulling itself from him and forming his dry lips into what could almost have been mistaken for a smile. "Yes, kaktusblüte, mysterious benefactor of mine. Yes, I am thirsty."

"I'll give you water," Draco said, in a gentle but firm tone he had learned from Remus, to set an agenda that would brook no disagreement. "But not for free. I have things I want from

you, and clearly, you have things you want from me. So we'll make an exchange."

"What question?" Grindelwald said, amused tilt remaining to his lips.

Draco had thought about this moment many, many times. It was here the negotiation truly began. He could have gone big with so many things, perhaps to show off privileged knowledge- things about Dumbledore or Aberforth or Ariana- perhaps to cut right at the heart of the mysteries he chased- the Hallows or even the mirrors- or perhaps lay bare where his interests most fundamentally lay, and begin by speaking the name *Dantanian Noir.*

"My question is," Draco said steadily, keeping their gazes locked the entire time, "Do you still believe in advocating wizarding supremacy over Muggles?"

"If I say yes," Grindelwald said wryly, though the effect was spoiled by his parched throat, "Do I still get water?"

"Of course," Draco said firmly. "I want this to be productive, Gellert- can I call you Gellert? I want this to be productive for both of us."

Grindelwald leaned back against the wall. "Only if you tell me your name. Oh, it *is* difficult to talk so much, when one is unaccustomed, with sandpaper in the throat."

"You can have my name," Draco said pleasantly, "*Or* the water, in exchange for your answer."

Grindelwald chuckled, although his eyes dropped to the water, and he greedily licked his lips. "No. No, I don't believe in advocating wizarding supremacy anymore."

Draco eyed him cautiously. "What, all this time alone has given you a chance of heart? Your dead stone heart has softened with loneliness?" he said caustically.

"You asked if I still *advocated* it," Grindelwald said calmly. "Not if I *believe* in it. That's a different question."

"Tricky bastard," Draco muttered, but Grindelwald seemed to find his pouty face more endearing than offensive. Draco conjured water for both of their glasses, and they drank.

Never had a man seemed more grateful for simple water, even as the wind cutting in through the window looked to practically freeze it on his lips. "Now. A question for a question. What do you say? Let us share information. You know about the outside world, and I know about myself. A fair trade."

Draco grinned to himself at the arrogance. There was a jauntiness in the way Grindelwald said it that made it more self-deprecation than genuinely braggadocio. "Fine, Gellert. But you have to explain both of your answers. Do you still believe in wizarding supremacy?"

Grindelwald didn't blink. "Yes. Of course. Surely a wizard of that ostentatious power of yours must have some understanding of the superiority of wizards to Muggles."

"But I'm Muggleborn," Draco said, widening his eyes innocently, and Grindelwald gave another honest-sounding laugh, setting down his goblet.

"You couldn't be more pureblooded if you had it written on your forehead."

"Along with, what, an armband with a swastika?" Draco sniped automatically, but it felt like he'd just had the floor pulled out from under him. "Wait- why would you say that?"

Grindelwald looked bemused. "You've got a posh accent, you speak German, you have aristocratic features..." He began to tick the evidence off on his dirty hands. "You were deliberately showy about knowing Muggle opera and theater, like every wizard proud of their Muggle Studies class- you spoke too casually about hell to be a Christian, you didn't hesitate to draw the Deathly Hallows... all of it is nothing much on its own, but taken together, it's a fairly clear profile. But you just told me you weren't."

Draco blinked at him, dumbfounded. "How?"

"By telling me you were," Grindelwald said neatly. "You said information wasn't free, and you wouldn't even tell me your name, but you volunteer that you're Muggleborn. Therefore, you aren't. The question is why you would conceal that."

"Fine," Draco said sulkily. "I'm a pureblood. My name is Lysander Wright. I'm a bold-faced liar. Are you happy now?"

"You shouldn't lie to me again," Grindelwald said mildly. "It would just be wasting your time. Your tells are too obvious. I'd know." With that hint of steel in his unthreatening demeanor, he suddenly reminded Draco of Dumbledore. Which happened to be the most threatening thing he could have evoked.

"Okay, Sherlock," Draco groused, and Grindelwald chuckled. Huh. That *was* one pop culture reference they would have in common.

"I'm sorry, kaktusblüte," Grindelwald said, with a placating tone and gesture, like he was not a prisoner but the gracious host here. "I do not mean to bully you. You are very kind to visit. Do not let an old man's temper drive you away before I help you however I can."

"Help, then," Draco said, ignoring the silver tongue at work. "Why did you say you didn't believe in *advocating* wizard superiority anymore?"

"Because the results were not worth the cost. Nor would they have been, even if I did upset the entire order and passing of the world."

Draco looked around them. "Aw, come on, this little old place isn't so bad. It'll be bloody quaint, once I've spruced the place up some for you."

Grindelwald gave a politely appreciative smile at the implicit promise, though he did not speak so lightly of this. "None of the results. From start to end. I was arrogant and short-sighted, and I lost everything."

Draco didn't know if he was guessing right, but it gave him a perfect opening. "Oh, you mean like when you killed Ariana Dumbledore?" Grindelwald's eyes opened wider, if not in shock but some small disquiet. "I'd like you to tell me a story, Gellert. Let's start with you killing Ariana- no need to linger on the details- and let's go on with every single thing you did from then, until you ended up in New Zealand."

"I didn't kill Ariana," Grindelwald said, and heaved a sigh. "Is that what this is? Don't tell me Albus is seeing towards his end of days, and he's hired some personable young man to drop in and charm the truth out of me. Can no one let sleeping dogs lie?"

"You know, I believe you," Draco said thoughtfully, though he could only guess based off that mild reaction. It was still more than most anyone else had to go off. "But you know who did."

"No," Grindelwald said, and his jaw tightened so much, the thought came to Draco, *he knows who and doesn't want the world to know, especially Dumbledore.* Since Draco doubted Grindelwald would even fully remember the existence of an Aberforth Dumbledore if pressed, that came down to Albus Dumbledore. He suspected Dumbledore was connected to this strange British pureblood, and didn't want him to know of his own guilt, maybe...

"Now," Grindelwald said briskly, "You want the story of what happened after that terrible accident? I fled. Reports were that I fled the country. I gave the impression I had, purposefully. Where did I go, then? What will you give me to tell you?"

"Not asking again," Draco said with encouraged cheerfulness, having found a weak spot, "About who killed Ariana Dumbledore?"

Grindelwald considered. "Fair enough," he said, and surprised Draco into a snort of laughter with his deadpan delivery. The man *was* charming, there was no denying that. "I went to Phineas Black." Everything in Draco had to push down the impulse to cry out at that name, especially with the way the talon wand flared hot in his pocket.

"Phineas Nigellus was the headmaster of Hogwarts at the time. A man whom, I suspected, not even his pet Crups could bring themselves to love. I'd had no shortage of irritation in our one previous meeting, soon after my expulsion from Durmstrang. I went to meet with him about enrolling in Hogwarts instead, and found out Durmstrang had salted the earth for me there, and most every wizarding school over the world. My reputation had proceeded me, and it wouldn't be good politically, to defy Durmstrang so strongly and openly with me. He was unctuously apologetic, but I was relieved, in a way. I hadn't liked the way the man looked at me.

"But he was the one I went to after the disaster. No one would suspect me to have stayed in Britain, I thought, and I did have one connection, who I thought I knew a way to use. I'd been right, of course. I found him in secret, and it wasn't difficult to wrap him around my finger with thinly-veiled promises of sex." Grindelwald seemed to mistake Draco's uniquely revolted look for disbelieving. "Oh, poor little kaktusblüte, it must be very hard to imagine that men could be moved to folly on *my* behalf like that. But I assure you, a century or so ago, I *was* rather *devastatingly* handsome."

And he said he loved *Dantanian.*

"Anyway, he had his own justification for asking me to stay, and giving me a place to stay where the authorities wouldn't find me. He kept saying I *reminded* him of someone, someone dear to him that he had lost."

Draco knew the name before Grindelwald spoke it, but he remained silent.

"That person was an old student of his, with the charmingly Wagnerian name of *Dantanian Noir*." He seemed to be watching Draco for his reactions, but he never paused for them, to try and pull one out artificially. "He had apparently also stayed where Phineas took me. It's called the Citadelle Xaphan. It's an island castle that House Black kept secret those days- have they let it out yet?" Draco shook his head. "He let me stay in the rooms and wear the clothes of this Dantanian boy. But he wouldn't tell me anything much about him. There was just a disgusting amount of weeping, and lamentation that he would never lay eyes upon anyone or anything again." Grindelwald smirked, voice going lilting in an impression of his teenage self, something like some immature little bitchy gay child. "Can you imagine? I was literally *right there*!

"I wasn't very interested in this lost love, not with all of the citadel to explore. Eventually, I coaxed out the story of Dantanian's end, and it was mildly intriguing, the business with the mad dragon, but nothing in face of the citadel. Can you imagine *that*, stumbling backwards into such a treasure trove for a boy like me, full of darker secrets than even the ones that had barred me from Durmstrang? I was fascinated by the place, and stringing along the old whimpering blowhard was a small price to explore it. It took some time, but I found something eventually that made me leave right away- yes, to New Zealand. It was a journal left in some half-broken cupboard in the observatory, written in too intricate a code not to be interesting, even if had the name of the lamented paramour on the inside cover.

"When I deciphered it, I knew I had to follow the ghost of Dantanian. Ever since I had learned of the Deathly Hallows, I had been waiting for destiny to come take my hand, and lead me to them. It seemed like they finally had, Death himself reaching out to extend the invitation to his superior. It might defy belief, how pompous I was back then, but yes, I thought it fate, another sign of my great destiny. I went with high hopes to the site of Dantanian's death, and was disappointed to find that no matter what digging I attempted, I could not find anything but the mad dragon's remains, and buried low in the ashes, a chest. It held Dantanian's possessions, things it seemed he meant to leave to what few friends he had." Periander had done better at that. "He must not have considered that he might commit whatever mistake he made with the dragon so badly, it would leave his last objects unable to be delivered."

Draco had gone into this with such a high opinion of himself. He hadn't reckoned on his own extreme lack of patience. "Don't play dumb," he snapped. "That's the last thing *you* could pull off. 'Whatever mistake he made'. You know what he did."

"I have always been curious, in truth, what led such a talented wizard to such a premature end. It always was such a regret of mine, never to have met him. He seemed someone who would provide endless entertainment, if I could have controlled him." Grindelwald regarded Draco thoughtfully. "If you are confident *you* have the answer, Mr. Wright, by all means.

Answer one of my last nagging curiosities- if there was some opportunity here I missed- and I will tell you everything I found and everything I did because of what I found in Dantanian's box."

"How could you not have already figured it, if you saw the Pensieve memories," Draco began, and then laughed at himself. "Right, of course you didn't. You'd never have tried to make a wand out of Astaroth's remains if you did."

Grindelwald leaned forward, like for the very first time he had found Draco interesting in himself, and not just because he was the first human being he had spoken to in years. "You have seen the memories of Dantanian? The ones he left for Dorian Malfoy?"

"Yeah, and they make it obvious," Draco sighed, though he supposed the behavior of the talon wand and the coda research made it more obvious. "Seriously? I'm going to lose all respect for you, Gellert, if you really never figured this out, and you aren't just testing me. He tried to turn Astaroth into a Dementor. *Duh.*"

It was impossible to tell, whether Grindelwald had been testing him, or just ignorant. Grindelwald likely preferred it that way. "Fascinating," was all Grindelwald said. "So I followed the trail of the memories, the one useful item I found in the box-"

"Now you're the one lying obviously," Draco said impatiently. "I've seen the memories. I know he had the mirrors. He gave one to Dorian, and one to Lamia, and there was one more, Espilce. I think it was small, and he had that in his dragon pendant, the one he used to turn the small Phineas into a Dementor." Grindelwald's face was a thing to behold then, as it shaded over with- most impossible of all things- something like *fear*.

"I was not lying," Grindelwald recovered without much delay. "The Mirror of Espilce *was* useless, I assure you. I found no immediate use for it-"

"You tried to turn someone into a Dementor, first chance you got," Draco said in a conspiratorial, utterly non-judgmental tone.

Grindelwald indulged him, leaning in to whisper, "I tried to turn someone into a Dementor the first chance I got. Oh, the embarrassment I felt then, after that whole ritual and no eclipse and no change in the farm boy but how he pissed himself in fear. I don't know if I've ever felt such a fraud. I Obliviated him, of course, but one never forgets these largest humiliations."

"I would have done the same thing," Draco said lightly, and was not sure whether or not he was lying. *Harry, whatever you think of me now, I'm glad you aren't listening.*

"So I assumed that possession of all the mirrors at one point was necessary for use," Grindelwald went on, "A kind of activation, and left the Mirror of Espilce alone. I would never find any use for it, but I thought I would in time. I had an errand of a sort to run first, of no consequence, but eventually, I took back up the mirror question, with how obviously tied they were to the Hallows-"

"The Elder Wand to the Mirror of Erised," Draco filled in eagerly. "The Invisibility Cloak to the Mirror of Espilce. And the Resurrection Stone to the Mirror of- Ecidyrue." Somehow, his

tongue let him say that word. Maybe because it was something Grindelwald already knew. It might not have been so laissez-faire if he'd tried to finish that sentence with, *you know, that big ugly silver thing I time-traveled through.* "And don't bullshit me. You went to make a wand from Astaroth's heartstrings, with Gregorovitch, which is how you knew about him to steal the Elder Wand from him later. I guess you didn't have it yet."

Grindelwald cast a glance at Draco's watch. "You are remarkably well-informed, for someone who went to all the trouble to break into the fortress of Nurmengard. Ostensibly for *information.*"

"I don't know the rest," Draco urged him. "Come on, hurry up."

Grindelwald smiled. That was one thing Draco had counted on from the first. This was a man who thrived off having an audience. "Well, as you said, he had delivered the mirrors to Dorian and Lamia Malfoy. I braved England once again, to pay the lovely young couple a visit. I forged a letter of introduction from some cousin too distant to check, and walked right into that shabby house they called a manor."

Oh, the effort then not to grit his teeth or snap at that. *Was that a test too? I never know when he's testing me, or just being droll.*

"The two of them would have been worth the trip in themselves. They weren't lovers, nor had they ever been, one could tell at a glance, but they were happy nonetheless. He was protective of her, well as he should be. That pesky family curse in the memories? Well, it had been advancing since then. She had lost all her hair, and there were signs her scalp might begin *molting.* What an entertaining freak of nature! And her bloodline had *purposefully inflicted that* upon themselves?"

"And Dorian Malfoy?" Draco asked impatiently, hating the twinge in his heart at the sound of that girl in distress, that girl who had felt like some melding of so many of the best qualities of Hermione, Luna, and even Millie.

"Dorian Malfoy," Grindelwald said, with audible satisfaction at the memory, "Was beautiful. No more, and no less, or so I thought." He laughed at the face Draco pulled. "We all have our vices, kaktusblüte. Admiring him was not my mistake. We had a very private dinner together- word of Lamia's condition was being kept secret as the grave, and they swore me to silence- and I had so *many* questions for them about their dear old friend they thought called Daniel. So many they were yawning before I was through. But I had to know what they had done with Dantanian's mirrors.

"Well, Lamia had taken Dorian's to Hogwarts, back when she worked there, and kept it in some secret room there. I intended to break in and steal it from Hogwarts, even if I *had* burned my bridges with Phineas Black abandoning him as I did. But I was distracted soon by the rumors of the Elder Wand, and after I had it, there were *far* more distractions. I was beginning to build a following- but you aren't interested in excuses for my incompetence. In any event, by the time I remembered the Mirror of Erised's place and desired to make the attempt, Albus Dumbledore had already taken up permanent residence there.

"The Mirror of Ecidyrue? That, Dorian still had. It was right in their cellar. And he could show it to me, whenever I wished, he said, and I listened, and *there* lies my mistake. It may have been the greatest mistake I ever made in my life, although I am not the one who suffered the most for it."

"Didn't you go right to see the mirror, and take it?" Draco asked anxiously.

"You would think," Grindelwald sighed, looking miffed at his old self. "But you see, we'd had more than a few tumblers of sherry by then, and Dorian Malfoy was- what you saw in the Pensieve could not hold a candle to what he *became.* He seduced me, and we made love so many times I fell asleep in his bed."

"He didn't slit your throat in your sleep?" Draco said dryly. "I take it that was his mistake."

"He could have tried," Grindelwald said placidly. "I would have woken first. But he did not attempt an assault in that bed. He merely left it. He used the time I dropped my guard to wake his wife, and they accomplished a ritual together that put the Mirror of Ecidyrue forever beyond my reach." He paused, not for dramatic effect but to shiver, and Draco summoned his blanket and began to transfigure it thicker.

"When I woke, I ransacked their cellars, but there was no finding it. Nor would there be, they said, because they had performed a spell learned from the books of Dantanian, books he'd left Lamia along with the Mirror of Erised. It was a spell of worthiness, to render the Mirror of Ecidyrue a possession of House Malfoy, and only accessible to those of that house who were worthy of it. An honor to which it turned out, Dorian was not equal, nor had he expected to be."

"There were other Malfoys," Draco said, heart in his throat. "You could have tried them."

"A cursory investigation of such," Grindelwald said dryly, "Proved that if Dorian had been unworthy, no other Malfoy was likely to come anywhere *close.* Not the brightest of houses, Malfoy. Their surname should have been Malhabileté." With what hung in the balance, Draco barely even noticed that potential goad. "But he was bright enough to trick me, and do it properly. I got out of him what he had done with little trouble, but only because he knew I could never use the knowledge. No matter what I did to him, demanding he retrieve the mirror for me, there was no way. He was screaming that he could never reverse what he had done, up until the very moment I cut him open for his insolence."

Draco cried out, and Grindelwald eyed him with a grandfatherly dubiousness. "Really, what is this show of morality? So blasé before, and now you grow squeamish?" *No, my bloody wand is just actively trying to burn a hole in my thigh.* "I had to kill him after he did that to me. No doubt he expected me to when he did it. In a way, he might have felt let down if I hadn't. We all knew the script we were to play."

"I think he might have forgiven a little deviation on your part," Draco said as facetiously as he could, but his heart wasn't in it.

"Certainly to save his wife," Grindelwald said curtly, and if Draco had thought the wand hurt against his leg before... *I get it, Dantanian. I promise, we can kill him for this if you feel, like,*

super strongly about it, just wait until we get what we need, yeah? "The Cruciatus Curse can do strange things. I had every intention of using it over and over again on that freak until she perished. My only regret was that I had not had the forethought to leave her husband alive to watch the process. But I miscalculated yet again. Do not think too harshly of me, I was virtually an amateur. Something about all that pain and convulsion speeded her... transition, perhaps one should call it, into a bird. She was fully an Augurey before I had my rage *nearly* sated."

"Quite a mess you left behind you," Draco said thinly. "But I suppose no one saw you visiting that secretive house."

Grindelwald shrugged with elegance of a sort, the insouciant carelessness Draco always attempted for his own such gestures. "I made the throat-slitting look like a suicide by Dorian. I left a note for it, saying he'd been experimenting on his wife, using Unforgivables to try and force the evil out of her, and he'd turned her into this creature. So he'd killed himself of shame, naturally, and his family believed it. I heard they had wiped him and the girl from their family tree and every mention in every history book. I don't know about the Perianders. I just know they took in the Augurey. She was useful, for their little side business, assessing. Those birds can live hundreds of years if they're a Maledictus. They had a custom to name them Maledictus, which shows how little they thought of them, but they did have the virtue of changing that last *us* for each, and replacing it with some fitting sound from the woman's old name."

"Lamia." *He killed Dorian, but how can I judge him? He* didn't *kill Lamia. I did.*

"Yes. Maledictum. I liked that name. Now, if you don't mind, I would appreciate if you begun *some* room improvement."

"Not until," Draco said, tasting bile, "You tell me why you gave up on the mirror."

"Oh, that? The Elder Wand seemed good enough. In the end, but for that, the Hallows seemed like what I used them for. A *symbol* of power."

"You didn't want to be Master of Death?"

"I have always wished to leave a better world behind me. Not to linger overlong in it."

"How noble of you," Draco said caustically, and Grindelwald leaned forward to stare at his watch again. "What is that? Why do you keep checking the time?"

"Two hours," Grindelwald marveled. "Unless there was a trick with the water, 'Lysander Wright'." His pronunciation was exquisitely derisive on the false name. "The time limit you would have changed back *has* elapsed. So it's something more intricate than Polyjuice. I had feared that."

"What are you on about now?" Draco's hold on civility was fast deserting him, but Grindelwald looked nothing but mildly curious in response.

"You are not," Grindelwald said confidently, "Who you are showing." Draco thought absurdly of color contacts and hair dyes, until Grindelwald finished, "This is not your age, 'Lysander', nor is this your true body or true face. Whoever you are, it is someone else, and you merely inhabit this form." He folded his hands before him, then said with a wolfish grin, "Why don't you tell me who it is you really are, Mr. Black?"

The Song of Orpheus

Chapter Notes

Playlist

If Grindelwald wanted to know who Draco really was... well, Draco would have to figure that out himself first, before he could give any kind of real answer to the second-darkest wizard that ever lived. So far, he liked said wizard better than the first-darkest, though if he kept on being so annoyingly perceptive, that could change.

"What do you mean by that?" Draco asked, with what he thought admirable composure. "This 'isn't my body', even though I haven't taken Polyjuice? You perceive some kind of disjunction?" He tilted his hair and posed rakishly where he sat, taking refuge in what Grindelwald had called brattiness in lieu of any other option. "Is it that hard to believe that someone of the tender age of twenty could have so many talents to recommend him? Intellect, wit, the width and breadth of my magical acumen, not to mention a certain sophisticated sensuality that bewitches every eye and ear... is that where you perceive this discrepancy, between who I am and what I show?"

Grindelwald's intelligent eyes had shown humor at Draco's mock preening, but he didn't hesitate to keep delivering precise little blows. "No, kaktusblüte, in your head." Draco touched his head of now-dark hair, biting his lip and tugging on his long braid. Grindelwald laughed aloud, at what must have been a very young and dumb picture. "You are an exceptional Occlumens. Too exceptional. No training can make any wizard have the kind of walls you do- walls that make penetration not merely incredibly difficult but inherently impossible, to any intruder of any power. I felt them as you pushed at mine, and even Albus was never my equal at Legilimency. Have you ever wondered *why* your mental barriers are of such an *unnatural* strength, which I imagine require uniquely little to no effort to maintain under duress?"

Draco kept chewing on his lower lip. *It's like the Langlock, I can't be allowed to give away the past.* "No," he said churlishly.

"It is because a different mind lives in the head of the body before me. Something of the usual connection between a physical body, and the soul and magic of that body's owner, has been severed. Like an umbilical cord, cut after birth. I have only felt such a severance rarely before, and only so strongly in a Maledictus late in the process of her transformation."

"Lamia," Draco breathed, stomach rolling over inside. He had come to Grindelwald for answers, and so far it only felt he was piling up more confusion.

"So," Grindelwald concluded, "This is not your body. And if you have seen Dantanian's memories, surely you are aware of *this* body's exceptional resemblance to Dantanian. If this is not, indeed, that young man's spitting image. My memory is not what it used to be." His eyes narrowed, until a more childish glee illuminated them, once there was a pop in the air that made Draco jump back. "Ah, time for the animals to be fed!"

Draco watched with surreal wariness as a grimy old bowl full of gruel appeared. That prompted Grindelwald to spring on it with great aplomb and devour it, only half by spoon, the rest by hands and gravity. Table manners seemed one of the first things to deteriorate in long isolation. "Didn't think you were hungry," Draco said, jerking his head towards the half-eaten breakfast.

"The breakfasts are the worst," Grindelwald said through mouthfuls of food, "Nearly inedible, I only eat them if I'm truly thirsty, though they make it worse in time. But that makes me hungrier for the other meals." Draco leaned in to sniff, and quickly scooted back as far out of the scent radius as he could. There was some kind of thick fetid meaty smell mixed with an unnatural sweetness that made him threaten to gag.

"Oh, it's rancid as well," Grindelwald said contentedly, "Not fit for pigs, but I've grown accustomed to it." Draco could only imagine the taste of the breakfast, if such stoicism had not been able to similarly accept that. "Only the worst for the mass murderers, it's in the civic spirit. As I told you before, sweet boy, we all have our scripts we must follow. Now, where was I? Ah, yes. You look like Dantanian, or you are him, or at least in his body. Quite a thrill for me. I did always wish so very badly I could have met him, even if this is some poor shadow of him."

Draco's fingers stroked uncertainly over the talon wand in his pocket. "If I was a Black, though," Draco said unsteadily, "Why the fuck would I take up the face of a Black bastard as a 'disguise'?"

Grindelwald had to process a particularly large mouthful before he could answer. Draco wrinkled his nose and conjured him a napkin. Grindelwald used it and ate and talked on, full enough of life to make anyone who believed him an easy mark think twice. "Small hints, like for your pureblood status. And my deductions, like those of that Muggle detective you named. Sherlock Holmes. You've laid them out for me like delightful breadcrumbs, beautiful young ghost."

He spoke as if he would have ticked off items on his fingers, were they not occupied. Draco conjured him water to help wash the food down, only now starting to feel how very much he was in over his head.

"Why would you care so much about the Dantanian Noir story? Yes, there's the mirrors and the Hallows, but I wonder, was Dantanian's vow to Hecate truly unnoticed?" Draco's nails dug into the bend of the talon wand so hard, for a moment he feared he'd break it. "Has there been no curse wrought upon the legitimate branch of his bloodline? No consequences for that fatal impurity, in the always pure?"

Grindelwald was quite the rhetorician. He seemed to spend twice as much time as necessary saying things, if he could say them with a flourish. He was rather like Draco that way. "I

wonder if there has been some blight upon House Black, and Dantanian's shadow does not loom large over that house still. I should hope so. They all got such a reprieve, what with that accident. I do believe Dantanian would have succeeded in destroying them all. And you would never have been born, to hide your vested interest in the story with some ridiculous tale of being *Muggleborn.* You might as well have gone by Daniel Shaw. You are lucky to have even seen Citadelle Xaphan, which you clearly knew of from your lack of reaction."

"What I hear is that you're guessing-"

"And what I hear," Grindelwald countered, "Is that you aren't denying it. Surely, even if it happens not to be true, you must concede it makes a great deal of sense-"

Draco felt a rush of real rage. "Tell me everything you know about the mirrors, *now*, or I *will* torture you, you ignorant genocidal piece of shit!"

Grindelwald's eyebrows raised, looking more tickled to have gotten out that reaction than he would have been by obsequious praise. "So genocide is *not* as genocide does. Very well, I have finished my midday meal. Commence the torture at your leisure." He pushed his bowl and goblet obligingly out of the way, and opened his arms invitingly.

"You won't tell me?" Draco asked, hearing his voice distressingly powerless.

"Given your mendaciousness, we should codify a more solid deal, for an auspicious exchange of information between two openly conniving parties. Would it not be easier, to have clear expectations when it comes to another dark lord?"

Draco's mouth fell open. "I- I'm not a *dark lord*!" It had all been posing and showboating, that dark lord in training shtick, compared to the man before him.

"And I told you before that it was pointless for you to lie to me. I can hear the lie. So. This is the deal. I do not think you will find it objectionable. I will speak to you today of the Mirror of Erised. These are not matters that can be glossed over quickly, nor will I be content to give away such treasures of knowledge without recompense of my own. For the other mirrors, you will visit me again tomorrow, and the day after-"

"Today's Sunday. And I'm busy until Thursday." Draco internally cringed at himself, though it was true. He'd be on his way tomorrow night off to Paris, and then be coming back on Wednesday. There was the second leg of Victor's tie on Tuesday night, and then celebrations if they won. He should have gone to Nurmengard earlier, but he'd thought he'd only need one visit. Bad enough he would be asking Dobby to lug him around the bloody Alps more days, let alone try and coordinate uncertain times of arrival and departure. "I could come back on Thursday and Friday. We'll see after that."

"You commit," Grindelwald said evenly, "To Thursday and Friday then? And perhaps later?" There was an eagerness in his voice Draco did not trust.

"Friday," Draco said tightly, "Is the year's first *total lunar eclipse*. Any special reason you want to see me *then*?"

"Is there a reason I should not? I assure you, any sliver of a view will not distract me, through this dismal window, in my dreary cell. Unless you fear something more nefarious, from the captive Squib centenarian. What is it you imagine the lunar eclipse will let me do to you, kaktusblüte? And how much do you overestimate me, to think I would have any means to know its precise date, after so many years without any charts?"

"You're not actually a Squib. You might- I don't know, *feel* it or something, like you did with my Occlumency." Draco narrowed his eyes. "That *is* the day we'd be discussing the Mirror of Espilce. The mirror of *eclipse*, according to your schedule."

"Ah." Grindelwald sounded uncannily like Dumbledore as he reflected, "What a charming coincidence." Then it was back to the more open, bleakly humorous jaded dark lord, as he leaned forward to add, "If you are even correct about the eclipse falling on that day."

"Hey!" Draco protested. "I got-" *An O on my Astronomy OWL*, he almost said, but he could already hear Sherlock over there's response in his head: *Oh, so you're a Hogwarts sixth-year, to value OWLs so highly. A seventh-year would be thinking too much towards NEWTs by now, and any wizard past that age would reference NEWTs instead of OWLs.* He didn't give himself away, but found he had little else to say. "It doesn't matter. So. Your 'deal'."

"It is a deal that you will find nowhere else in the world, kaktusblüte, and I ask for nothing in return, save you answer a few of my questions as well. I have privileged knowledge. Gleaned from Dantanian's coded journal, which I destroyed a century ago."

Just like Severus. Fucking old men and their trigger-happy Incendios. What is with everyone destroying Dantanian's things? Even his body got burned up and eaten. Sorry, wand, guess you aren't getting that back either...

"Fine," Draco said, and conjured himself a great number of pillows. Grindelwald admired them, Draco's sumptuous aristocratic default of black and gold and bronze of silk and velvet with fringed edges. Or perhaps he was more admiring the figure Draco cut lounging back on top of them.

But the pillows claimed at least some of the lust in Grindelwald's eyes, as he mused, "I don't suppose you'd see your way to leaving those in my cell on your way out tonight?"

"Depends on how I'm feeling at the time," Draco said with faux-friendly, rather demonic brightness, and drew a full-throated laugh from Grindelwald, out from deep in the diaphragm.

"Do not fear, then, young Mr. Black," Grindelwald said congenially. "I will not disappoint my generous benefactor. Only fill in your true name for me, and I will begin my unfolding of the first mirror."

Draco probably shouldn't, but he was tired trying to play mind games with someone so much more patient. "Draco Black," he admitted. "Okay? My real name is Draco Black. Now spill."

"A constellation," Grindelwald mused. "Gone more into vogue than demonological names, with House Black, I believe."

"After Dantanian, it's been all constellation-type shit," Draco said impatiently. "So? Desire? Hello?"

"Your understanding of this," Grindelwald began, falling into an almost professorial mode of seriousness, "Will depend on what you already know, of the stories. But it is here I will begin. You know the story of the three brothers, and the Hallows." Draco nodded, trying not to give away his overblown excitement, his racing heart and desperate anxiety that any moment, hellfire would rain down upon him and stop him from getting his real answers. Any second, Langlock would stop Grindelwald's tongue or close Draco's ears or the whole tower would collapse beneath them with the weight of secrets that should not be told.

"What is often left out of the story is the full story of the second brother. He begins in the tale of the Hallows a cold and arrogant man, but with a broken heart behind that sneer. The tale tells of a girl he hoped to marry, and her early death that prevented their love. But she is just a placeholder, an object of motivation, as women are so often in these unspeakably boring tales, of the hero's journey of young men and their ever-plodding Bildungsromans. She was not such, in the fuller story. Her name was Estella, and her father was a gravedigger."

Draco didn't try to hide his knowledge, when it came to just a myth. "Thanatos," he supplied.

Grindelwald smiled. "Yes," he said, with a queer silky savor in his voice over the name. "Eros and Thanatos. Inseparable and doomed. And the story of the brothers was inseparable from the three daughters of Thanatos, because as you will remember, it is Eros who created the first wand."

"The coda."

"Precisely. And the three brothers- their names were Pictor, Sculptor, and Pavo- came to the house of Eros to learn from her, how to craft such tools of magic for themselves, and to learn from the third daughter Luna, how to wield these tools. She is the first witch, and she made the first wizards. The brothers had the power to use magic, to cross the river by a conjured bridge, because Luna had given them that power. And Death was so angered, because humans had never before wielded such powers to defy death."

"But didn't Luna-" It was hard not to speak the word and picture his cousin, which put an irrational affection in him for this mythical figure. "Didn't she take from death, when she used magic to save her family from Obitus? Wouldn't the nobleman have killed some of them if they kept resisting him, to save him from stealing the first daughter?"

"Yes," Grindelwald said with still that over-happy smile, "I imagine the man would have had to kill the mother, to steal the daughter. One death. But see, unlike the brothers, when Luna took a bounty from Death, she returned one to him of equal value."

"She did it by killing Obitus," Draco reasoned out. "A death for a death?"

"You are quick, kaktusblüte," Grindelwald praised, though it had been patently obvious. "Death's magic is less like today's wand-waving, as we think of it, than ancient alchemy at its base. Chemical, even. Equal exchanges."

"What, is Death, like, some businessman trying to balance his checkbook?"

Grindelwald leaned forward, the air in the room going colder. "Would you not be aggrieved," he said with a soft menace, "If someone stole from you?"

Draco's chest clenched in something like terror, or guilt. "Fine. So the brothers knew the daughters. The second brother- Sculptor, you said- wanted to marry the second daughter?"

"Yes. It's not clear how Estella died, although there are references in different places to different plagues. Dantanian believed those were metaphors, and it was all part of Obitus's cruelty. That the nobleman had first become enamored of the local peasant girl *Estella*, and sought to couple with Estella before he ever did her sister Sola. He had killed her for resisting him, and made her body disappear, but his lady wife knew, and that is why she would not let their stillborn child be buried on his family's land. And Obitus killed Thanatos not just for refusing to exhume the boy, but for his daughter's resistance to her 'rightful lord'."

"I really wish you hadn't burned those damn notebooks."

Grindelwald laughed in what seemed sheer pleasure. Mystic rigmarole had him happy as a pig in shit. "So, Dantanian believed that the brothers had known the gravedigger's family *before* Luna ever became a witch. That Estella had refused Obitus, even once he offered to put aside his pregnant wife and wed her properly, because she had been engaged to her childhood friend, Sculptor. And so when Estella disappeared, Sculptor grew bitter because he believed his beloved had fled sooner than marry him.

"It was only once Obitus came to claim Sola, and made wild statements about all of the girls on his lands belonging to him, that Estella's sisters suspected him in Estella's death. So once Obitus was dead, Sola summoned Sculptor, who brought his siblings with him. Eros made the other four young people codas, and Luna taught them to use them, to help her find the truth about Estella's death.

"Soon, the five watched the burial of Obitus, thought stricken dead by some curse from God above for his iniquities. After the funeral was done and the sun was down, they intruded in the dust. Before the sun rose, their new magic led them to Estella's slain body, buried in the grave meant for the lord's son. So they took her to Eros, and buried her together in the way her father the gravedigger had once buried so many, in the graveyard with her ancestors, where the lord's son still lay as well.

"The brothers lingered to learn more of magic from Luna. The impetuous and gallant first brother Pictor fell in love, with the bright beauty Sola, who had so boldly summoned them. He asked for her hand in marriage, she accepted, and the wedding was set to be held in Eros's village. Sculptor had declared he would never love other than Estella, and Pavo the Hundred-Eyed had declared he never meant to wed, however much Luna would watch him, when she did not think she could be seen." Grindelwald's smirk had a world of implications in it, a brief human intrusion into the near-biblical tone. "So the brothers returned to their own village, where all their kin were long dead, to retrieve their mother's wedding ring and all her trousseau for Sola. Except it was the time of year where the river between their villages was highest, and the banks most flooded, and it is there we find the brothers acting in defiance of death."

"It's like ancient Greek myths, in a way." Draco was feeling an insidious comfort in Grindelwald's company beginning, now that he had told the man his real name. "Arachne and Athena, you know that story? Arachne is those brothers and sisters. They dared to live in defiance of the powerful nobles of the land and the natural social order. The force of nature too. And their audacity- of *course*- brought destruction down upon them."

"The poor girl who challenged the goddess to a spinning contest, and had the misfortune to win. Yes. So in the basic myth of the Hallows, Pictor quickly uses the Elder Wand to slay a rival, and brags about it to all and sundry, resulting in his speedy death. But in truth, the brothers only separated after the wedding, and some other tasks. Pictor married Sola with the Elder Wand in his pocket. But he was driven to violence when a man rose in objection of their marriage- another peasant, but one long-enamored of Sola, who had once thought her his own. Though Sola pleaded for him to forgive, Pictor felt himself humiliated, and challenged the man to a duel on that very wedding night. She could only prevail on Pictor to wait a bit more and set the duel for the next month, after their honeymoon.

"Pictor claimed he was at no risk, with his wand invincible. But Sola went to her sister, who studied the Elder Wand, and *Luna* found it incomplete. She claimed it was not invincible, because there was a half of it missing. And no, there is no clear understanding, what she might have meant! Women do not tend to be called Luna who are overly open and *clear* about things," Grindelwald said dryly, at Draco's look of curiosity. *Fair enough. Poor Neville.* "At Luna's advice, Sola spent the month devising an object that would complete the work that Death had deliberately left half-undone. Sola is the one who crafted and entirely constructed the Mirror of Erised, and bound it to the Elder Wand."

"Why?" Draco breathed, mind reeling. "Why would the Mirror of Erised make the Elder Wand complete?"

"Because at its core, the Elder Wand is an instrument of omnipotence, for a child. The power to defeat anyone- an elder branch coda filled with the uncanny blood of Death himself, never before let into the world, whose spilling gave birth to Thestrals, changing the later legend to a regular wand with a core of Thestral feathers. It is the instrument of a sadist, a madman, a living paradox-"

"And it's not invincible. Because Dumbledore beat you."

"Indeed. And what use is it to be able to win any duel, when that turns all of life into a duel, where the wielder of the wand must be ready at any moment to fight at all strength, to make his invincible weapon of use? Any man can be killed in his sleep, before he is given the chance to wake up for a fair duel. Any man can be robbed before he can duel. Any man can *duel*, without his full heart in the fight, and make the wand's power weak when *he* will not wield it properly. No, the Elder Wand might more aptly be named after its fellow Hallow, not a cloak of invisibility, but one of invincibility, a cloak that can be taken on and off. Because when you take off an invisibility cloak, any eye can see you."

"So... desire," Draco tried. "The Mirror of Erised shows what your heart desires most. It can give real invincibility if that's what you want, and that's why it makes the Elder Wand perfect?"

"No, no," Grindelwald laughed, swatting a hand playfully through the air, as if all of this was child's play, purely intuitive. "There is a Muggle term- see, I am well-versed in the works of those such as Freud, whatever you think of my believes on Muggles- known as *omnipotence of wishing.*" Draco felt a chill up his spine, and drew his knees in closer to his chest. The pillows were beginning to no longer feel soft enough underneath him, as his right calf from long sitting started to go numb. "Yes, the Mirror of Erised 'shows' desire in a mere *image*, for those who do not *own* the Elder Wand. But for its owner... it can do more. Far, far more."

"Like put a Philosopher's Stone inside?" Draco blurted, and felt exceedingly stupid after.

"What?" Grindelwald looked thrown, until Draco explained the story of Flamel's resolution to die and Voldemort's pursuit of the stone. Grindelwald had known of Voldemort, Dumbledore's opposition to him, and the circumstances of Voldemort's defeat and the Boy Who Lived, though his knowledge seemed to have been cut off well before he could get much further than that, to, say, Voldemort's return. He looked more animated than ever, at the chronicle of Dumbledore's ownership of the Mirror of Erised, his unorthodox use of it, and the way it had worked in his favor with the pure heart of the Boy Who Lived.

"He was testing him," Grindelwald surmised. "He wanted to see if he was worthy of it, and whether he really was enough of a paragon of heroic virtue to live up to that exalted title. These tests of worthiness do grind my gears, to parrot a more modern expression. But that is very much like Albus. I would have thought him less of an idealist in his elder years. Or at least I would have hoped."

Draco tried not to let his face betray any of his thoughts, about how cold-blooded an 'idealist' Dumbledore really was. "Or," Draco said thinly, "He thought it a good way to test the boy's *use.*"

"Not a fan of Albus?" Grindelwald actually scooted forward, to eye Draco in shameless assessment. "You *would* have attended Hogwarts with him present, unless you are truly as old as Dantanian Noir or in that range. How well do you know Albus? Do you believe he has plans with this Potter boy? Do you disapprove?"

"I think there's always several reasons Dumbledore does anything, though he'll only give one, and only half the time will it be true. And that though he may face setbacks, like you," he gestured towards Grindelwald, with a curtness he rather meant to be insulting, "*That man* will always get his way in the end."

"As if he had stepped through the Mirror of Erised," Grindelwald mused facetiously, "And we all live here in *his* chosen world."

"Through?"

"The Mirror of Erised is a portal," Grindelwald explained. Draco's heart was ready to rebel and burst his chest. Sparks of fitful fuzziness sputtered, not just at his sleeping leg, but static all through his limbs, tips of fingers and toes fizzing, asking, *Are all the mirrors portals? Are all the mirrors portals*?

"Legend holds it that the holder of the Elder Wand can walk through *into* the image of his utmost desire and reside in a world where it is fulfilled. Hence the promise of invincibility. He would live in a realm of pure desire, where every wish was reality."

"There are stories," Draco said cautiously, "Of men whittling away to death, staring at the mirror in longing-"

"Men," Grindelwald finished, "Whose minds may have crossed the threshold, never to return. It is a psychological world, not a true one. Sola, perhaps, was the least skilled of her sisters. And Dantanian thought that when she showed Pictor the mirror she had made him, he rejected it angrily, because he did not like the desire it showed him. He believed it faulty. He went off to his duel, and died not long after, and never got to properly use the mirror."

"What would it have showed him?"

"Dantanian didn't know, but whatever it was, it's no surprise. Few adults ever look into that thing and see what they think they want to see, or else what they think they *should* want to see."

I don't understand anything. I don't understand a thing. I'm so completely at sea. I'm in so far over my head. And I'm so, so cold.

"I've never seen the mirror," Grindelwald went on, "And it's not clear, how omnipotence is implemented, but I'd imagine some form of portal use is possible, at least theoretically, for anyone connected to the Hallows, or even just the other mirrors, either owning now or just having once owned. Perhaps those trapped in their own dying bodies misused it, or they were those without the Elder Wand- or perhaps they *were.* Maybe that is the limit of desire, even to the highest and most evil of magicks- the limit being the mind. In any event, the fact that Albus could *store* something in the Mirror of Erised, and have it only react to *desire*- that confirms every theory I have had, so thank you for that. Within the threshold of a portal, I'd imagine..."

Draco's mind was a whirling and yet numb thing, exhausted from all the information being pushed into it, from the sheer enormity of what he was taking on, a world Grindelwald seemed to find some light entertainment to pass the time. *No one will live or die based on* his *grasp of this bloody material.* Draco was almost grateful when he saw the gold of sunset beginning behind the ledge of the narrow window, and had to make his apologies.

"You will return tomorrow," Grindelwald prompted. "To hear of the Mirror of Ecidyrue. And you'll leave the cushions."

"Yes," Draco echoed mechanically. "To hear of the Mirror of Ecidyrue. And I'll leave the cushions."

Grindelwald looked thoughtful. "I don't mean to be greedy, but since you'll be out and about in the world, perhaps you could bring us some... choicer comestibles."

Dobby was less put-out than Draco had feared, to hear Draco's ambition to return in a few days. "Dobby has been thinking," he said shiftily, "That it might be useful if Dobby made a map of the castle." He held up Karkaroff's one drawn from conjecture and memory, already with some of Dobby's corrections. "Dobby has been being useful fixing it!"

Gryffindor elf. "Far be it from me to disappoint your ambitions."

Dobby took them out of Nurmengard, then out of the Alps, and back into Munich, where he left Draco within the heart of the university library. Draco emerged to find Viktor waiting to walk him home with no suspicion in his dark-eyed gaze, only anxiety about the coming fixture, and a quickly-growing crowd of onlookers and well-wishers, hoping for autographs from their sporting hero.

Viktor seemed preoccupied enough by the weight of this duty that he noticed nothing amiss with Draco. Nor did he at dinner, however shaken Draco was, from having dueled wits with Grindelwald all day, and then right to eating dinner intensely analyzing the European Quidditch Cup over lean chicken and asparagus.

Viktor did pick up, though, on a certain weakness in Draco, once he asked about Harry, and Draco was too mentally exhausted to equivocate. He just heaved a long sigh and stared at the tablecloth.

"Is your relationship not going vell?" Viktor asked sympathetically, giving Draco one of those broad-palmed shoulder pats that felt less like comfort than a rather fraternal assault.

"I don't know if is." Draco moved the remaining asparagus around his plate. When he realized he had formed the triangle, central line, and part of the circle of the Deathly Hallows, he hurriedly pushed it all about randomly and stopped. "He put us 'on a break' or whatever- said he needed some space- and I think he's going to break up with me after break. He's spending Easter with our adopted parents. They'll probably tell him to dump me. And they'll probably be right."

It might be cruel of Draco, to go on about his romantic troubles when Viktor had historically far worse luck. But Viktor just looked grateful to be pulled out of his own apocalyptic musings regarding Parisian Beaters. "Vy vould they be right? Harry is nice, but he is lucky to have you! Vat vould make him not like you anymore?"

Sweet of Viktor to look so baffled, but then again, this was the most time they'd spent together since *fourth* year. He wasn't exactly caught up on the person Draco had become since then. Draco hadn't referenced the murder of Cantankerous Nott in any of his letters, and he was still trying to covertly figure out whether Viktor knew about that or not. "Well, for starters, I'm a compulsive liar." Viktor repeated the phrase blankly. "Pathological liar?" Draco tried, then wracked his brain. "Erzlügner, I guess." It was close enough.

Viktor eyed him thoughtfully. "Like ven you and Hermione vere making that secret potion, for your uncle Remus?"

Yeah, Viktor really *had* known a much, *much* more benign version of Draco, than the one that sat at his table with him now, under his roof, eating his food, pretending he hadn't just hung

out with the man who murdered several of Viktor's not-too-distant ancestors.

"Yeah, stuff like that," Draco sighed, "And worse," and put down his fork. His picking and playing at his food was beginning to reach Grindelwald levels of table manners.

"Vy must you lie to Harry Potter so much?" Viktor asked thoughtfully, and Draco squinted at him.

Langlock for a start. Except Harry was right, that Draco confided more in everyone *but* him. "I just... he thinks I'm an angel, Viktor. An actual *angel.* I've seen inside his head when I was teaching him Occlumency. He just has this image of me, and..."

"Draco. Harry is not as clever as you, but he is not blind. He might think you *look* like an angel. But if he has been your boyfriend for more than a year, then he must have learned by now. You are no more an angel than Voldemort."

Draco spat out his coffee all over his food, surpassing Grindelwald in poor manners as he laughed helplessly. The decaffeinated brew of finest Ethiopian dark beans sprayed up into his nose as well as onto their surroundings. "Bah!" Draco sputtered, wiping at his face. "Oh, Merlin, Viktor! You made me..." Viktor was laughing too, a heartening sound from someone usually so hunch-shouldered and shadowed. "And you said the name! I didn't think you did that!"

"Vell," Viktor said reasonably, "It vas necessary to fully make my point."

The Parc de Château was not, strictly speaking, *in* Paris, but just outside it, in a town that had looked quaint and welcoming during the day. The spring was well on its way here, in brilliant contrast to the brutal chill of Nurmengard, where April seemed like forever the heart of winter. The stadium's setting inside Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye was also the most awe-inspiring sports arena Draco had ever seen, especially in person- that was, except for Highbury. Draco had to keep his allegiances straight. But even he had to admit that the famed Parc de Château, with its sixty thousand seats all filled, made the humble Murmeltierstadion look like such a dump, Muggles with garbage trucks would be liable to arrive any minute with more trash for the landfill.

Draco arrived there on the team bus with Viktor, which proved a mistake. For the occasion of a European quarterfinal, the Ministère des Affaires Magiques seemed to have gotten overexcited and gone overboard- as if they didn't have these, like, every two or three years for the Panthers- and closed off the entirety of the Saint-Germain-en-Laye area to Muggles, with visual as well as physical blocking and masking, and many officials manning borders with great aplomb. That was, except for during the arrival of the team bus of the Murmeltiere, which received the traditional bus welcome from the Parisian ultras, the so-called *enfer violet*. The officials and policeman joined in as devils.

Draco had expected the show to involve wizarding flares and fireworks, yes. But he didn't appreciate the number of them that seemed customizable ones imported special from Weasley's Wizarding Whizzes. Especially a persistent magenta one that wrote *Pierre le*

Victor, Viktor le masturbateur over and over across the sky. Pierre Ginaud was the Panthers' world-renowned Seeker, who had been trash-talking Viktor all over the papers in the run-up to the first as well as second leg. Once Viktor had beaten Ginaud to the Snitch once, it had gotten personal. In a much less comical way than the Weasley fireworks.

There were chants of *Pierre le Victor, Viktor le masturbateur* as their bus neared masses of young, mostly all-male supporters. The ultras were in their distinctive long jackets, the Muggle French flag with an added horizontal stripe of purple, and held their flares high, of the Panthers' blue and purple. Many of those flares soon hit the bus, with some light explosive spells just to be hospitable. As did many bottles of Butterbeer and stronger substances, and larger indeterminate objects made of glass. The barrage of smashing had some of the youth players in the squad trying to hide under one of the seats. Draco called out to scold them, though even he ducked instinctively when someone threw their bicycle against the front windshield.

"They have hung me in effigy," Viktor complained morosely, as they finally made it into the basement entrance of the Parc de Château beneath a live-size doll of Viktor, dangling off a violet rope by the neck. "Vell, they do that every time I play here, but still." Draco caught an eerie flash of the caricatured scowl of Viktor outside, beside a scowling Viktor inside, from purple fireworks above before they all plunged into shadow.

Draco was thus thrown into a European quarterfinal, with more access than he could have bought. Viktor dragged him around like a security blanket, before finally letting him go off and find his seat. Viktor insisted he take one near the president of the Murmeltiere. Yeah, it *had* been a good idea by Ron, to camouflage him. He was there before, though, to listen as Viktor delivered the least inspiring pre-match talk imaginable, dwelling morbidly on their many comparative shortcomings against the Panthers, first in experience and then much more. Or it seemed so, from what Draco could catch of the German. Everything sounded drearier in German.

"Vell?" Viktor asked, adjusting his captain's armband over his brilliant crimson robe, while the other players clumped back into little clusters of sinners awaiting the apocalypse. "Vat did you think?"

"Er. Very inspiring."

Viktor frowned darkly. "You say you are Erzlügner. But you are not very good at it."

Draco shrugged. "I mean, you were better than the manager." It was true. The manager had gone on about the new tactical system, which half of the Murmeltiere patently did not understand, and then delivered so many platitudes about the victory of the underdog against all odds and the power of spirit and self-belief, Draco could have hurled over the Firebolt rack. "I can see why you went realistic, after that we-can-do-it positivistic dreck. But I, er, just hope you didn't swing the pendulum too far the other way."

"Vat vould you have told them?"

Draco closed his eyes, imagining the Kingsnakes in this position, about to take on Paris-because in truth, the gap between Kingsnakes and Groundhogs *was* likely less than the one

between Groundhogs and Panthers. He imagined Millie's sharp-eyed impatience, wanting to believe behind her feigned full cynicism, Vince and Greg competing to hide behind each other and making the other guffaw nervously, Blaise's showy arrogant overconfidence making Pansy whimper but giggle, Astoria staring fixedly at a small photograph of her sister from her pocket- and Theo, yes, Theo, Theo watching him with those brilliant deep blue eyes that held all the unwarranted faith in the world. Because they *had*- well, they had used to.

"I would tell them that they just have to do their part, and keep the deficit below 200 before the Snitch is caught. That the Snitch can get caught anytime, and a group of charmed Nifflers riding Hippogriffs could keep even the Panthers out for long enough, if the Snitch gets caught at the right time. Because you *are* going to catch the Snitch, Viktor- not if, *when,* and *when* you do, if they've only let Paris put in 19 more past them than they've put in, their Seeker is going to fuck these little prissy-faced snot-nosed frog-eating French snots up the arse so hard for them, they'll be shitting out the Marseillaise on their way out of the Cup. Ja?"

Viktor blinked at him. "I vish you could give the speech."

"Go on," Draco said with a shrug. "Try it out. What do you have to lose?"

"Um," Viktor called in his quick fluent German, "Hello? Attention!" They quieted, looking back to their Seeker with their young, mainly German faces owl-eyed with fear. "I just have one more thing to say. It is possible we will lose, and possible we will win. I am not as sure we will win as our manager." There was derisive laughter, seemingly at their manager's expense, that Viktor didn't look to have expected. But soon, he plowed on. "But I just wanted to let you all know, there *is* a better chance we win than you might think. Because I am *going* to catch the Snitch. So your job is just to keep the deficit below 200."

They did not seem used to this level of confidence from him. "How can you be so sure?" the Keeper Waldsmidt called. "Pierre Ginaud is the best Seeker in the world! Yeah, maybe you beat him to the Snitch once, but how are you so sure you can do it twice-"

Draco's ire raised. "No, you whiners, it's Viktor! Viktor Krum!" he exclaimed, in his rough but eloquent German, most skillful in it when he was angry. "So get behind your captain!"

That didn't get the reaction he'd hoped. "Oh," one of the youth players said. "Krum's just confident now because his girlfriend got him all pumped up."

"Girlfriend?" Waldsmidt said blankly. "Draco's a guy." He peered over at him. "I mean, I think."

The youth player looked confused on an existential level. "Then *why does he have such long hair*?"

It may have been at Draco's expense. But the laughter then still seemed to change *something* in the air.

"I have such long hair," Draco declared- *Because I tried and failed to disguise myself to Gellert Grindelwald*- "Because I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks of me!" Blaise was in his head saying, *Right, that's why you curse the tongues of anyone who talks shit about you*,

but he pushed that aside. "You all shouldn't either! Yeah, all those people out there at the bus, they think you're losers. Maybe the pundits and prognosticators all think you're losers. Maybe your own supporters think you're losers!"

"Uh, Draco..." Viktor tried, and Draco shook off his arm.

"Maybe *I* think you're a sorry bunch of losers too! But you know who doesn't think you're losers? *Viktor!* Viktor thinks you're more than that, Viktor's staked his *career* on that! You *can* be losers on the night because of what he did for you in Munich! Just don't be big enough losers to wreck the aggregate, and you can pay Viktor back for that belief! Because you know what's worse than a loser? A coward who gives up before it's even begun! Even with a cushion in place for their sorry arses! So what's it gonna be? Are you gonna *just* be losers, or are you gonna be cowards too? What? Are you gonna be fucking cowards?"

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, as the echo of Draco's shouting faded in the small away dressing room. And then one of the Chasers leaped up, a Muller with a broad grinning face that looked like he'd been waiting for his time, and it was now. "No!" he yelled. "We're not! We're not going to be fucking cowards!"

"No!" yelled the other players, rising to their feet with him. "No! *We're not going to be fucking cowards*!"

"240 to 280," Hermione sighed fitfully, and Draco pressed the landline tighter to his ear to hear her. "Oh, your team really cut it close, didn't you?"

"They did," Draco groaned. "I swear, Striker, when I saw Viktor come up from that dive with the Snitch in his hand, half his teeth out from hitting the hoop- here he is! Viktor! Viktor, say hi to Hermione!"

Viktor had his teeth newly restored and a jubilant air with them, double-fisting what passed for beer steins in France. That name, though, made it fall away, and Draco wave a tipsy fist at him. "Come on, I know she's your ex-girlfriend, but she was your friend too, wasn't she? She listened on radio with her family! Come on, let them congratulate you- her parents too, they're Muggles! They love football!"

Draco sat back and let Viktor talk to the Grangers, breathing in the smoky air, the red-hot atmosphere, the Euro pop and dance blaring so loud his eardrums throbbed along with the bass. He let his mind drift. He could see the Parisian streets outside the curtains of the club, dark and shining reflective with the rain which had graciously waited until Viktor's victory to fall. He stared at the stretch of the pure white and yellow lights, wondering about nothing in particular, just wondering.

Eventually, Viktor got off the phone, with stories of Mr. Granger's confusion between Seekers and football ball-boys, and Draco joined him in another round. Then they were called over for an umpteenth round of the revised Panthers chant, in their deliciously clunky-accented French: *Viktor le Victor! Pierre le gran fraudeur! Viktor le Victor! Pierre le gran tricheur!* And on and on it went, monotonous but a thrill every time...

Draco yelled it out with the same enthusiasm as the rest, players and friends and family, as the night went into the morning, thinking all the while: *I wish Harry could have been here. He would have loved tonight.*

And remembering the signs of green and silver, on the day he would never forget- on the sign he would never forget- *the Gordian Nott.*

Theo would have loved this too, before I...

Theo would have loved this too.

"The Mirror of Ecidyrue," Grindelwald began, "Was said to be the last created of the- mmm, sorry, this really *is* a delicious cut of beef. In case I ever escape, you *have* to give me the name of the restaurant that makes such delicious sauerbraten."

"It's sweet of you, to try and find out my location that way," Draco said dryly, "But no thanks. Do you think I transferred it from the restaurant wrapping for no reason?"

Grindelwald peered up from his rather fancier plate of today, his beef all mixed in with the sauerkraut in a way that made Draco cringe, but he looked deliriously happy with the way it tasted like that. Draco tried a bit together as well, and nearly spat it out. He'd forgotten how much he bloody hated authentic sauerkraut. "I do know now," Grindelwald intoned mysteriously, "That you got it from a *restaurant.*"

"Come off it," Draco snorted. "That's a weak point to try and score off me and you know it. You could have gleaned that I've had *some* recent proximity to civilization, just by the impeccable state of my *hair.*" He'd taken pains to dress nicely again that Thursday, so he remained a sight Grindelwald would appreciate. And today might be the most important day of his life. He owed it to himself too, to at least *look* like he knew what he was doing.

Grindelwald got a good laugh from that before he got back on topic, about the Mirror of Ecidyrue as promised. Draco's ears were primed, even as he ate with all the casualness he could muster, as if Espilce was the one he cared about, per Dantanian, and the other two just had to be got through first. Any moment, Grindelwald might let slip one nugget, one parcel of information, one single word or turn or phrase that would explain what Draco had researched so much in first year and never managed to answer: why the Mirror of Ecidyrue had taken him into his own past.

"Estella had always loved the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Or maybe it was Sculptor, but the legend loomed large over the two of them. I reckon Sculptor thought himself Orpheus, without even the trouble of a song, when Death gave him the Resurrection Stone. And the Stone did bring Estella back to him, seemingly whole. But of course, she was not whole, because the Resurrection Stone is not like the Philosopher's Stone: as much as it gives, it takes back. Estella gave herself back to Death soon enough. Most think Sculptor soon followed her.

"He did follow her in a way, just as Orpheus descended to the gates of hell to call for his stolen bride. But where he followed her was to her old self- to *his* old self." Grindelwald gave a smug look, before delivering what he seemed to think a prospective hammer blow. "To the past. See, incredible as it is, this tale of overreaching humans includes time travel too." Draco couldn't bring himself to feign surprise, too impatient to hear the rest. They were silent, Grindelwald finished his plate, Draco conjured him another napkin, and then they got back to business.

"Sculptor confessed to Luna his intention to rejoin Estella in death. But Luna stopped him. See, Sola had always maintained that her husband would have lived, should he have let himself explore the secrets of the Mirror of Erised, and make the Elder Wand complete with it. And Luna had already had ideas about a mirror of her own. But she was willing to do- what is the expression in English that I heard a visitor utilize once? 'Double duty'. You must use such idioms as well around me, kaktusblüte. I find such vernacular charming- no, I promise, no more digressions. Luna was willing to do double duty.

"She remembered when the three of them faced Eros's grief over their Thanatos's death, and Estella's suggestion Eros travel into the past to see Thanatos again. So she proposed that the Resurrection Stone was not all that Death had said it was, like the Elder Wand had not been, like she already believed of the invisibility cloak. A Hallow was only a half-completion of their requests, but she could finish them with the other half- the easier half to make, a duplication of the Hallow with its own reflection. A phantom half like the dark side of the moon.

"So Luna made the Mirror of Ecidyrue for Sculptor, named after Eurydice. Like Sola had with the first mirror, she inscribed words for its use of guidance and warning. And Sculptor went before the mirror, but it would not work for him, no matter what he did. So he grew dark again, and called Luna a fraud. But she told him she could do no better with his fables of Orpheus and Eurydice than a trade, and if he was not truly willing to make it, the mirror would be as useless as if he did not hold the Resurrection Stone."

"A trade?" Draco felt at the precipice of something fatal. He Vanished their plates and napkins, so the unveiling of fatal destiny would not take place over sauerkraut.

"Orpheus had a fundamental flaw, and so did Sculptor. These sensitive young men believed they loved these women more than themselves, more than life itself. But in their hearts, what they wanted back was not her, but the two of them together again. A life *with* her, not with her alive and him dead. And there was no space within the implacable will of Death for such a trade.

"Orpheus, I think, was offered a bargain in hell by Hades, another name for Death- a bargain Orpheus refused. He was arrogant and thought he did not need to trade his own life to recover Eurydice. So Death tricked him to punish his arrogance, and sent what he thought was Eurydice back with him, cautioning him not to look back. Because when he looked back, he did not see Eurydice after all. And some think looking back like Lot's wife is the sin he made, the sin that lost his love with a lack of faith. But it was never Eurydice behind him, echoing his steps on the winding windy way up out of hell."

"What was behind him?" Draco was staring at the talon wand in his own lap, fixed on the bend as if that was the precise location Dantanian lived. As if Dantanian could tell him differently than what Grindelwald was surely about to tell him. As if Dantanian could shield Draco from what he should have known already.

"A shade," Grindelwald answered enigmatically, "Or a ghost, or a shadow, or a daughter of Death itself, the tales vary. I prefer the one that explains that follower of his as Eurydice's body, given back with the soul left behind. When parted with a violent fissure, the body without soul or magic *would* quickly wither, and become the dark hideous thing called the world's first Dementor. Hence why Dementors hunger for souls. I believe they are seeking their own soul, one out of so many, without the ability to distinguish between human shells. Only hunger, that hopes one day to be filled with a soul that will restore all it has lost. It is like the same prelapsarian fantasy of Orpheus, then- that fantasy of so many religions and politics, perhaps even the fantasy I held, desiring an end to the Statute of Secrecy. But that dream is all that was left to Orpheus and his soulless Dementor, when he was too selfish to sacrifice himself and make the true Orphean Bargain."

"The Orphean Bargain?"

"What Luna had written into the mirror, and named for him. The only deal Death would accept. 'Only one may climb back out of hell: Eurydice.' It means, only one of Orpheus and Eurydice can ever end up alive. There must be the will in Orpheus for it to be Eurydice, at the time he enters the mirror at least. If the would-be Orpheus wishes to live his old days again, he must be willing to die in Eurydice's place, though his heart may change before the time comes. The Mirror of Ecidyrue will only come to life, and begin the Song of Orpheus, for he or she with that true conviction in their heart." Grindelwald peered at Draco with impish humor in his wrinkled eyes and brow. "Needless to say, very few if any have likely approached the mirror with such *genuine* sentiments. Dantanian believed that his namesake, the founder of the citadel, made this bargain, entering the mirror and going off to die for some Eurydice of his, but then chose in the end to live rather than 'stay in hell'. Hence his isolation and strangeness, hence his dark experiments- and most of all, hence his writings' unusual mysteriousness and *bitterness* towards the Mirror of Ecidyrue."

"So... 'only one may climb out of hell'..." Draco felt about to throw up on the stone of the cell, or burst into tears, or else into laughter. Laughter was the closest, threatening to bubble up out of his throat independent of himself and never, ever stop. "It means that only the time traveler, *or* the one they went back to save, can live. But couldn't the- the Orpheus, by going back in time and reliving everything, change more than just that one life or death, of their Eurydice? Couldn't they, with foreknowledge, protect or kill others?"

"Trades," Grindelwald gave a dismissive shrug. "The calculus of Death. A life for a life. If Orpheus wished to save others, then he would have to take other lives in return. Dantanian wrote... I think he wrote, 'with his own hand', but there is no telling if it is that drastic. Dantanian could be so infernally dramatic."

"Look who's talking," Draco said, the most mechanical little jibe he had ever delivered.

"We do," Grindelwald agreed with a sweeping gesture, "Both find ourselves in dramatic company."

"Then- what's the problem? Couldn't he kill someone else for Eurydice?"

"That's not the deal, sadly," Grindelwald said flippantly, and made a face of faux-sorrow. "Alas, poor Orpheus, unable to murder his way out of *this* quandary! For any other person on the planet, yes, he could trade a life for a life. But for the Orphean Bargain, which bought him passage back in time, only the original deal will do. Orpheus for Eurydice, or else Eurydice will die again all the same, at the same date and time she died before."

The Battle of Hogwarts.

Severus.

"Orpheus or Eurydice," Draco echoed, to be sure with that last dying bit of hope he had not misheard. "Orpheus *or* Eurydice."

"Yes," Grindelwald said patiently. "Orpheus *or* Eurydice. I am quite sure. There is no other trade."

Draco Black or Severus Snape.

Me or *Severus.*

Only one may climb back out of hell.

"But of course," Grindelwald finished, "There is one comfort for Orpheus."

Draco's head shot back up. "What?" he demanded feverishly. "*What*?"

"That the decision remains, in the end, Orpheus's own choice."

Blutmond

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"So, the Mirror of Espilce," said Grindelwald, with poppy seeds between his teeth. He licked them out leisurely as he reclined back on his vast pile of gold and bronze cushions. He seemed to be enjoying his reheated breakfast of mohnzelten with Kaisermelange, from the finest Viennese bakery Munich had to offer. It was Draco's third visit to Nurmengard, and he already had Grindelwald living like a king, or a Kaiser. Draco wouldn't think Fuhrer.

By all appearances, said Kaiser was quite content to deliver the mysteries of the most unknown of the mirrors to Draco. Too bad Draco could barely bring himself to listen.

Light filtered in from the narrow window, although that would that would fade to mere moonlight, and by the time midnight hit, a total eclipse. That probably had some significance for the Mirror of Espilce- Draco didn't believe in coincidence when it came to Grindelwald, even if this was a truly incredible coincidence- but all Draco could think of was the revelations of yesterday.

"The Orphean Bargain," Draco interrupted, cutting off the explanation he had been tuning out. "You said you regretted not finding the Mirror of Ecidyrue. That means you thought of using it, right? Did you think of any way around it?"

Grindelwald's eyes narrowed as he sipped his coffee, the smell of the cognac unpleasantly pungent. "I thought of using it, yes, when I read what Dantanian said it could do. But that instinct faded once I saw the cost, and no, I could not think of any way around the bargain. Nor was I willing to pay that price. I wanted the third mirror so I could assemble *all* the mirrors. I thought it would make something impressive happen."

"Who did you want to save?" Wherever Draco positioned itself, it felt precarious. He'd snapped at Viktor at breakfast this morning. He was so on edge, it was strange no one had been cut.

"Ariana Dumbledore," Grindelwald said simply. "You know the story, Kaktusblüte. I wanted to take back what happened. But not enough to forfeit my own life as a trade." *So you and Dumbledore could go on being kinky dark wizards in gay bliss, no dead sister in the way. That doesn't work if you're in the ground, huh?* "Regret is an admission of weakness. Now I have been honest, more honest than I have been in many, many years. I ask you to take a leap of faith in return, with honesty. Were you planning to ever tell me you *held* one of the mirrors?"

"What do you mean?" Had Draco been too obvious in his familiarity with the Mirror of Erised? How could Grindelwald guess he had purloined it-

"Because you went through one. No?" Grindelwald asked in a casual tone, and finished his coffee. The poppy seeds were all out of his teeth.

Draco sat paralyzed for a while, consummately impotent despite whatever promise the talon wand bore. Grindelwald cleaned up his breakfast, put the detritus aside, and said, "The Mirror of Ecidyrue, of course."

He had to be guessing. There was no reason for Draco to feel as if that vine in the dungeons had cut the castle's foundations and the tower was crumbling beneath them.

"I-" Draco expected his tongue to lock up whatever he did, but not denying it would be as good as an admission. "I'm not." The words came out feeble, but he hadn't expected them to go from mind to tongue at all. He presumed that usual seizing sensation would come if he tried to *admit* it, though. Why was that thought tinged with a mad disappointment? *So many years no one knew, I couldn't tell anyone, I've practically lost Harry because all I do is lie and lie, but I've had to be a liar because I couldn't* tell- *and now this-*

"You are," Grindelwald said, and folded his hands in his lap. His serious air made Draco's stomach plummet further. "I might have suspected as much, when I felt the disjunction between your mind and body. But I did not connect it, until you were so transparent, in your devastation about the mirror's true nature. You are devastated still. And to think you struck me as *intelligent*." His lower lip curled. "Did you really walk into that mirror without understanding what you were doing? The rule is obvious. *Only one*. Inscribed right on the mirror. How could anyone miss that?"

It didn't feel real, someone else speaking of his circumstances. It had to be his own voice in his own head where he had been isolated for so long. It was like this was not Grindelwald but some figment of his imagination, with the choice of Grindelwald to voice this derision no doubt psychologically interesting. "I was drunk," Draco said in dazed defensiveness.

"Drunk," Grindelwald echoed in near-awe. "One of the three *most* powerful objects on the planet, and you used it so drastically while *drunk.* So it was an *accident*?" Draco nodded, dazed, and nothing stopped the motion, just as nothing had stopped his tongue. "I do not know what I am more impressed by, the sheer power that would have taken, or the sheer stupidity. My, my, Draco Black. My, my. Mein Gott."

"Everyone always *thinks* I'm this brilliant dark wizard." Draco thought aloud, in what he rationally knew was no longer his own mind. The Langlock had somehow failed. *Is there no point in it since he already knows? Has the mirror given up on me in disgust? Am I just hallucinating? No, I can still smell the cognac, in the dregs of that cup.* "They all fall for the act. I guess you must have too, huh? But I'm just making up everything as I go along. I've never had any idea what the hell I'm doing."

An admission of weakness to requite another. For regret, a trade of gross incompetence.

"You fooled me, you say? No, I was not wrong in my assessment of your potential. Whatever you were in your future, you must have changed since then into something different." Grindelwald leaned forward, with the untroubled excitement of someone presented with a new puzzle that had nothing to do with him. "So the Mirror of Ecidyrue works, and you made a deal. For whom? I take it you're experiencing buyer's remorse? But how could you have made the mirror work *without* consciously offering the bargain?"

Draco tried to drag himself to reality. "I shouldn't- I'm telling you too much." It didn't matter that Grindelwald was the only expert, or the only person he'd been able to speak to about it. It didn't matter that some presentiment of relief was there, at unburdening himself of his most unshakeable lie. It was the relief he'd sought so many years ago on Christmas Day, going to Severus in the dungeons, but... "We're supposed to have a deal, for exchanging information-"

"Oh, Kaktusblüte." Grindelwald's dark eyes were uncomfortably full of knowledge. "Are you really in a position where you can afford not to utilize every resource you have? I take it from the pitch of your dismay that however it happened, you know whose life you have traded yours for." Draco nodded miserably. "And that the date of your Eurydice's death is not as far away as I would hope, for a young man so prepossessing in manner *and* presentation."

"Next year." Draco was feeling at his tongue with his teeth as he spoke, convinced it would catch up and go into overdrive any moment. "A bit more than a year from now. The start of next May."

"What do you have to lose? Either you *will* die, or you will lose someone you loved enough to once prefer their life to your own. Oh, poor boy. I will try and help you to understand this."

"In some way that will benefit you. I know your game. How many visitors did you convince to help you break out over the years? You'll find some reason I *need* to get you out. If you don't, *you'll* always be worried, that I'll come kill you to silence what you know." *Or bring Gilderoy to Obliviate you at least. Not exactly the kind of labor the Ministry had in mind, when they remanded him to private custody.* "I can't trust you. I *can't.*"

"If you distrust me so," Grindelwald invited, "Talk to me now, and kill me after." He laughed at Draco's disbelieving look. "Can you call what I have here a *life*, young old man? I have grown old and bitter alone. I expected to die of old age alone. It would be a pleasure of a kind, to die at the hands of someone strange and beautiful."

"Fine. But I'm not some do-gooder. Don't expect me not to take you up on that." Once the floodgates opened, there was no constraining them. "I think it was my godfather. I was thinking about his funeral that night."

"Godfather?" Grindelwald wrinkled his already wrinkled nose, let down. "No tragic love? That would be more poetic. And not even a real family member?"

He is my real family, Draco almost said, but he remembered how he'd cut Severus out of his life. Was Severus his family? Did he owe him his life, not out of debt, but from forces beyond debt and payment?

"My godfather. It's me or my godfather."

"So you travelled back in time. How far?" Grindelwald's eyes seemed to be calculating potential timeframes.

"Seven years." Draco laughed aloud at the absurdity he could finally say this, to *Gellert Grindelwald.* "I was eighteen before. I woke up as an eleven-year-old. I had no idea what had happened. But my Hogwarts letter was on the table waiting for me."

Grindelwald looked appalled after a split second of calculation. "So- not twenty, then? Seventeen?"

"Almost. Or- I don't know, almost 25, depending on how you look at it."

"Well. I don't know *how* much of a dirty old man to feel now, for admiring you. But in my defense, you are the spitting image of Dantanian, right before he died... yet you are still a *Hogwarts* student?"

"Sixth-year will be done soon-"

"So you're in the same class as the Boy Who Lived. Do you know him, Harry Potter? Are you friends? Is that how you know about the business with the Mirror of Erised and Dumbledore, and Voldemort, trying to return?" Grindelwald looked abashed not to have connected the dots sooner, though his mind did work lightning-fast with enough information.

Draco could have reached under his shirt and pulled out the initials necklace, on a longer chain for the occasion. But some things he would keep in reserve. "Don't you dare grill me about your beloved Albus now. I need to figure out what I'm going to *do*, now that I- now that I'm faced with a choice. In a year, but things do tend to sneak up on you. There will be a war in between, a real war before too long. I won't have much time to think then."

"You know the future," Grindelwald said in beaming happiness. "Do tell me about one subject, then." Draco shot him daggers. "Myself only. You cannot begrudge me that curiosity." Draco agreed, and Grindelwald's impishness made him look positively young. "Did we ever meet in- what should I say, the past timeline? I take it you've been sent back *into* your old body. Did we have other encounters?" Draco shook his head. "Do you know anything of my fate?"

Draco squinted. He hadn't exactly held onto Grindelwald's death date as premium information. "Um, let's see, I forget when you die. I think maybe... next April? March? I don't know. It was a really..." It was hard to find words for these things, now that he was allowed to give them voice. "It was not the funnest of wars."

"I take it, then, I didn't go naturally." He reminded Draco strangely, in that moment, of Neil Palmer.

"No. Worse. You get killed right here, by Voldemort. He's back already, and uglier and snakier than ever. And trust me, you won't enjoy dying at *his* hands, at least not aesthetically. He used to be a real looker, Tom Riddle- gave Dantanian a run for his money- but all the fucked-up dark magic and rebirth shit has turned him into this sort of noseless living sperm."

"*Voldemort*?" Grindelwald looked insulted. "Surely not. That ideologically bankrupt posturer? I die at *his* hands?"

"Yeah. Guess that makes him the best dark lord of all time. Transitive property."

"Is that why he did it?"

"Nope." Draco watched for his words' implication to make their way to Grindelwald's face. "He wanted to be sure of his ownership of the Elder Wand."

It took maybe two seconds for Grindelwald to understand and his detached glee to be gone. "So Albus was already dead."

"Should I be humming something from Tristan and Isolde right now?"

"I take it Voldemort killed him."

"No." Draco took on Grindelwald's flippantness. It was something like the pleasure of superiority he'd felt when betting on the Quidditch World Cup, already knowing he'd get the Minister's pocket watch. "That was my godfather."

He'd actually surprised Grindelwald. You always knew when that happened, because he'd stop running his trap for more than a second or two.

"So. There is a war to come, and your godfather was a combatant, who eventually died in it. I take it he was on Voldemort's side?"

"No, actually." The giddiness of his own stupidity fueled him on. "Not really, Voldemort just thought he was. It was a whole thing, it was complicated. But my godfather is pretty much the closest person to Dumbledore. The only one he actually tells his true plans." Grindelwald got a sour look. Draco had to be amused by that hint of somehow, of all things, jealousy still. "Don't worry, your Albus is still an eligible bachelor. My godfather is-" Gilderoy popped into his head. He'd been about to say *is already spoken for,* and Merlin, there *was* someone more than Draco it would *break* if Severus died- "My godfather is way too young for him. He works for Dumbledore as a professor at Hogwarts."

"Does your godfather know you're here?"

"No. Other people do, though."

"Does he know the deal you made for him?"

"No. No one does." Grindelwald gave him a look like he hadn't been born yesterday. "Really! There's this block on me, that kicks in and won't let me tell anyone. I don't know why it doesn't work with you. Maybe because you figured out on your own."

"Not even Albus? With your confession or not... if you've been his student for this many years, and have ties to the Boy Who Lived... how could he *not* have figured it out? You make it obvious. I knew after three *days*."

"It doesn't matter much. He dies in, like, two months. And no, I don't have any interest in stopping it. Or helping you contact him, or have some sentimental reunion with your long-lost love you lost over all the sister-murdering. This is about me. About the Orphean bargain. I think-" Draco bit his lip. "What you said about saving *other* lives, that's- I know other people I care about, who die in the war. And people who already should have died, and haven't. Do you know anything more about how it works, that trade with Death? Is Death, like, a person, or just a metaphor? *Why did you have to burn Dantanian's notebook*?"

Grindelwald laughed at Draco's consternation. "I seem to recall it was because, like you, I believed those were secrets I would take to my grave. Is this crisis really epistemological or ethical? Are you looking for a way to make the bargain not *apply*, or an excuse not to *fulfill* it? A godfather is, in truth, not much of a bond-"

"Shut up!" Draco lost his temper more quickly than he had thought possible. And Grindelwald had been going on about *his* shows of weakness. "He's- he's not someone you can easily throw away, okay? But I'll have to choose, me or him... *this* is what I came back for. Not to help someone, not to save someone, but to die for him. I came back to die for him, and I don't know! I don't know what to do, I mean it, I've never known what to do..." He buried his face in his hands, losing control. Grindelwald made soothing noises, like if they'd been closer he would have been stroking his back.

"If my input is not thoroughly unwelcome, with my limited knowledge, I would have to put myself on the sight of not completing the bargain. You are the one I know, and you have given me foreknowledge along with coffee, but most of all, you have given interest to my endless repetition of subexistence. It would be hard for me *not* to wish you the one to survive over a stranger-"

"And he killed your Albus," Draco groaned into his hands. "In another world." He forced his face up, though he felt close to tears. "I can't just trust *emotion*, either! I have *other* people I need to save, not just him-"

"Indeed, I *would* appreciate some form of rescue from perishing by means of *Voldemort*-"

"Not *you.* Merlin, I have a *war* to win- *we* do- and I've changed too much already- I don't know what's coming really now- there's my aunt, there's-" Theo came to his lips after the word aunt. Then *my mother* threatened to come out too. "If Dantanian really has hold of me, and he wants what he swore to Hecate, then maybe the best answer would be for me to die sooner, if that would still fulfill the bargain. Blast that window open and fling myself from this tower-"

"Kaktusblüte." Grindelwald rose to his feet and touched his shoulder from behind, gentle, almost paternal. They stared together at the narrow sliver of light from outside, like the outside world threatening to encroach in. "Now is far too early for despair. Particularly despair involving damage to Nurmengard's structural integrity that you wouldn't be alive to fix for me. Putting aside that intriguing remark about Dantanian, and the mystery of just *how* you got hold of the second mirror... If you lack a clear picture of the future, because you have altered this rendition of the timeline- violating all the known laws of time travel in the process, my congratulations on that- then there is an answer that must present itself." Grindelwald let go of him, to gesture with both hands towards the perilous light. "If you have

something of Dantanian in you- I presume what you said, about those wands I had made, has something to do with it- have you shown any ability at pyromancy?"

"Only the fire manipulation part," Draco said sullenly. "I've never *seen* anything in it."

"Neither did Dantanian, as far as the memory showed. But he did not have a proper tutor. He had no one to initiate him into the fire's mysteries. True pyromancers, of the like of Elizabeth Weston, require a significant event to awaken to the call outside the normal stream of time in the fire's fluctuation of light. You said tonight is a lunar eclipse?" Grindelwald bared his teeth in a grin Draco still could not trust. "Come back tonight during the eclipse, and you will find your answers."

Draco did not trust. That didn't keep him from feigning the need to sleep early, barring his door, and Apparating out for a prearranged meeting with Dobby, who'd hung around sightseeing clandestinely in his break. Dobby seemed tired once they arrived once more in that ruined hall with the whistling razor-cut wind, and the cold of the alps at night was a senseless beast. But above them, the partial eclipse had already begun. Midnight was the hour they had set, in the heart of the total eclipse.

Draco took a final swig of his own coffee-and-spirits, before tossing the thermos away and taking the short flight upwards. Dobby, faithful as ever, promised with no difficulty to stand by far away.

Grindelwald had his face pressed to the slit of a window. Draco was seized with a reckless impulsiveness. "It's the wards that hold you here, right? Not these walls?" Draco asked the Prisoner of Nurmengard, with the belated thought that he was not exactly asking a disinterested party.

"The wards," Grindelwald said, with enough resentment in his voice that Draco took his word for it.

And hey, if he did manage to inadvertently be the one to finally break Grindelwald out of Nurmengard- he *had* promised Dumbledore he would pay, for keeping Draco Black in the dark.

"Bombarda!" Despite the unhoned percussive force of the spell, his control was enough so that the shape it blasted in age-old stone was something like a window, albeit a circular one.

"I'll close it after if it makes you too cold."

"No," Grindelwald said quickly, "I want to see," and reached his hand out the window. He had to recoil, as his fingers came up against an invisible barrier, which shimmered red in the air until he moved away. Draco tried to touch it and his hand just slid past, unbalancing him enough to nearly fall out the window before Grindelwald steadied him.

"I cannot escape," Grindelwald said, letting him go. "But it is *something*, to see more than shadows of these great old mountains."

"And the eclipse," Draco said eagerly, watching the moon be blotted from the sky, and the mountains turn more and more into mere silhouettes. "Is it really such a magical night, the lunar eclipse?" He enjoyed on a visceral level the sight of uneven blasted stone outlining the progressively more shadowed sphere of the moon, the dust of rubble beneath like he had only just begun the work of bringing castles down. "I have the branches."

He gave Grindelwald the branches from black walnut trees gathered with Dobby- such a Gryffindor, he'd assisted without even explanation- and conjured a wide shallow iron basin for the wood. Grindelwald arranged them not in a natural teepee shape, but a thin circle, then a triangle inside- "Why are you putting *those* in the shape of the Hallows?" Draco complained. Grindelwald just raised an aged eyebrow, with a look like only the inhuman would deny the old and decrepit their small pleasures.

Draco laughed, uneasy about that word over and over again in his head, *trust, trust, trust,* when no one around him could ever trust *him* to tell the truth-

"This is the stupidest thing I've ever done," he sighed, after Grindelwald stepped away and welcomed him to set the fire. "And there are so many contenders for that position."

"Such as going through the Mirror of Ecidyrue drunk?"

"I'd just gotten out of prison, see." Draco felt compelled to set the record straight to one person at least, in case he ended up somehow setting *himself* on fire, or hurtling after all from this new hole in the tower. "Azkaban. Only a few months, but I'm a sensitive sort."

"Ah. So you've been in prison yourself, Kaktusblüte. I never would have thought. But I suppose it explains..." Grindelwald gestured around at the new finery and creature comforts of the space, the pillows and transfigured bed and furniture- and by implication, all the food Draco had brought to him. "You had an intimate knowledge, of the bitter unfriendliness of bare stone walls."

Draco nodded. "Incendio!"

Grindelwald was watching his wand instead of him now- yeah, he'd definitely started putting things together about the talon wand, without having to be told- and looked cheered. The flames first illuminated a rough shape of the Hallows, before beginning to grow high enough to make it indistinct.

"Want it back?" Draco traced his hand in the air after pocketing his wand, and confined the flames to the Hallows shape. They turned blue-white from compression. The clean circle all around, glittering like aquamarine at the bottom edges of the basin, made him think of Protego Diabolica. He had missed an opportunity, not giving Grindelwald shit about having stolen that spell, first chance he got...

Draco's wristwatch alarm went off for midnight impending, the same way it had for Naufragiam with Luna. He cast instinctive warming charms on both of them, even with Grindelwald in the large thermal down parka Draco had brought him. A look at the watch reminded Draco that it was from Harry.

Harry's intrusion into his mind made his self-questioning start up all over again. *What am I* doing*, this ritual could be* anything*, why am I obeying a man like this, he's as bad as Voldemort- worse, and a caged panther still has claws, there are just* bars *to keep him from rending you open, and if you let the panther choose the* location *of the bars-*

"The total eclipse," Grindelwald said, with his Austrian accent thick, the aesthete showing in the emotion in his voice.

Draco waved an inviting hand and the neat stenciled picture in flame turned to one wave-like roar upwards, that swooped high with the tide and never came down. He approached it close enough to feel its tendrils dancing in the air right beside his face, and toyed at its face absently like a kitten curling yarn- as if he could bend the angry shell of the moon, behind the heat, and turn it from orange-red to blue as well. As if he was Dantanian, and *could* pull it down from the sky.

"The blood moon," Grindelwald said, warming his hands while feasting his eyes greedily on that sight. "The German is more eloquent. Blutmond. Many Muggles and wizards in ancient times thought it presaged evil. Like a king, a god, or the moon itself had been attacked and brought down. Savaged by a jaguar." *Or a panther.* "The Christian Bible speaks of it in the Book of Revelations, a harbinger of the end of the world. *The moon will turn to blood.* We have an hour likely now, while it will be strong enough."

"What magic does it have? What will its magic do?"

"Ah, the bloody acts a young man called Gellert Grindelwald committed, once upon a blood moon," was the nostalgic sigh in response. "It is fairly straightforward, for all the mysticism and Muggle confusion. The moon is blocked, yes, but there is still light, and that *bloody* light... it delivers upon the most fundamental building block of existence."

Studies sprang to mind, undertaken with Hermione for spell creation. "Carbon?"

That gave a baffled Grindelwald a good laugh, at the drunken time-traveler, before he finished, "Power. Look into the flames, and capture the rhythm of the flames' light, controlled by hands and heart. In time, the light may coalesce into shapes, and then hallucinations. If it seems vague, I knew a pyromancer once- a follower of mine- who found it much like attempting to perform Legilimency. Not on a person, but a pyre."

"Will you see anything?"

"No. The pyromancer's visions are his alone."

Draco closed his eyes, with the world that greeted him steadily more pulsing and flesh-red. When he opened them, the flame went red. First was a natural orange color, then it intensified, like it was shifting purposefully to match the blood moon, dark patches appearing so there was almost no way to distinguish between them.

Legilimency on a pyre. It had to be worth a try.

Legilimens, Draco mouthed, gathering his mind, and heard Bellatrix's voice in his head instead of his own.

Your mind is a dagger. Not a thing to be cut.

He imagined his mind as a Black Dagger, with the obsidian catching every gem-like glint of flame, and plunged it into the fire of the blood moon.

Fire. The warmth of fire and its insufficiency. Fire builds in veins. Fire in the veins of a dragon where the burning shall not be burned. A dragon's veins. Silver dragon. Fire silver like the dragon. Fire sparking opal and kaleidoscope upon mountain snow. Where every red light will become white and then shatter. Where dragons dare not fly for fear of what sleeps beneath the mountains, in the hand of the devil of snow-

Snow fell on L'Infern. Fire was breaking into an endless snowfall and laying on the empty ruins, where the spiral garden was overgrown with anger. Its green spilled out, eruptions of life between broken stone and opal frost, caught in places, like fossils in white. Draco's feet tread through the fire on the ground, before he was knee-deep in the accumulation of flame. Its wet numbness sunk right away into his heavy black clothes and cloak, which settled on him as if apologetic for their insufficiency.

Draco fell forward until his face crumpled against the icicles of the hazelnut tree, *gianduja,* the taste of chocolate and hazelnut paste melting on the tongue faster than the slow thawing of snow around human warmth, and he was crying. He had been crying already. He was himself, on his knees in a garden destroyed by magic. The unnatural pattern, of where roots were ripped away, told of human force. And he *was* that force, and the snow, the cotton candy-thick drops of fire that gathered on his pale hair as Luna's voice asked,

"Did you bring me back Tom Riddle?"

The heart of winter.

Every year at Malfoy Manor was the Heart of Winter gala, and the ritual of the ancients behind the pureblood posing and forgetting of winter's promise and threat. *The heart of winter is made of flame.* Winter spread across the land like wildfire, but follow the fire backwards in its trail of impersonal fury and *the hand that holds the fire is the heart of winter, the price of Malfoy, the body whose veins flow not with blood but winter-*

The smell of hazelnuts was melting and the smell of fire was the true one. The warmth turned inverse, as the snow of Castell de L'Infern became the ice in the eyes of Draco- no, it was not Draco, though the eyes were the same. That was Father, who had also been wrecked by a human will. Father was crumpled on his knees gasping with his eyes melting, pain making tears escape involuntary. A small handprint was written across his cheek, with one hand clutching his cheek and tears escaping over it. Melting and yet the ice in that stare grew

instead of thawed, hardened into something immoveable and hateful. Hatred impotent as the stump on his other wrist.

"What have you done, Bella?" Lucius was demanding in hysterical repetition. "How could you. How could you!" When he pulled his hand from his face, his tears gleamed over the talon brand, as if the salt would crystallize, only to be broken by the force of his walking stick being cracked across Draco's back- but Draco *was* his father, and Father was more frightened than he had been in his entire life as he shrieked into an empty room, with footsteps stalking away. "How! How! How, Bella, how could you, what have you done, what have you *done...*"

"What have you done?" Severus asked, the true father's voice as composed and cold as the false father's had been trembling and cracking. Summer sunlight breathed into the library tower like the ghost of an old conflagration, at the hands of the owner of Citadelle Xaphan, its true owner still. "What have you done, Gilderoy?" Severus demanded. Gilderoy fell to his knees before Severus crying, whimpering incoherently. "Have you no answer?"

"No answer," Gilderoy gasped, lovely melancholy face stricken with terror. "No answer, just- I didn't mean to betray you, Severus. Not *you.* I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry-"

"What is this begging and cringing? Do you imagine I will *hurt* you?" Severus paced around the small confines of the tower, where paintings of dragons hung, capturing fire from sunlight with unmoving eyes beginning to move. "Do you imagine I am like the man whose initials you still wear? Do you? You may well, those initials are mine too-"

"I wish they *were* yours!" Gilderoy cried out, and Severus's pacing ceased.

Severus steadied himself on a bookshelf. Books fell without noticing, and caught aflame in the leaking liquid fire of the summer light.

"I wish I was yours." Gilderoy raised his face, cornflower blue eyes the heart of summer. "I wouldn't ever try to betray you, Severus, because I love you."

The fire rose from the books, to the sound of Narcissa Malfoy's screams atop the tower. The dragons stirred uneasily in their frames, dormant too long, as Dantanian Noir set their brand alight again and again-

The fire burned high and true in the fireplace of Slytherin house, where it caught upon the opal in the necklace Theo had given Draco when they were both still human. The opal hung in the air beside Theo even as he and Blaise sat with Pansy laughing. Astoria was watching from behind the green sofas, alone. Her small pale hand tried to reach the opal and slid through. It was only as she walked away that her fingertips began to bleed small jets of flame that melted in the lakelight.

She didn't see. All she did was nearly trip over the sake the three of them had been drinking between them. The bottle said *silver dragon.*

Blaise got up and tried to take the opal out of the air, but his hand went through. He went anyway, leaving Theo and Pansy alone.

The world outside Slytherin was dark, long past midnight. The clock was ticking loud enough to wake whatever dead lay beneath the stones of Hogwarts. Pansy's wild, giddy, terrified laugh was a strike of opal fire in the air as she jumped forward the moment Blaise was gone, and hugged Theo like they had both just won the Quidditch Cup again.

"How did you do it, Theo? I can't *believe* it!" Their gazes were lit with flame together, green flame leaking through sterile silver cold. "I wish we could tell Blaise-"

"No one tells anyone. Not even Professor Snape. Not until it's over."

"And when it's over?"

Theo smiled, face unbearably handsome in the firelight. His deep blue eyes held the balance of every constellation in the sky frozen in them.

"Do you think-" Pansy hesitated, in face of eyes at a place beyond where any mortal or immortal could them. "Do you think it will make it better? Do you think you'll go back to- to who you used to be? Because I miss that person, Theo. I miss the old quiet bookish Theo. The bloke who gave me so many assists, when we played Quidditch together. The Gordian Nott." She bit her lip, looking to try to hold back tears. "Will you write a book then, do you think? You're Lord Nott, you won't have to worry about money, you can just rest and write. You always used to say that, that you wanted to be a real author someday."

"I will write a hundred books," Theo said, "And every one will wear my father's face."

Fire was shaking. Fire was coming apart. Fire was struggling against the cold cruel wind like Voldemort against the Cruciatus curse, writhing half-rotted open. Voldemort-skeleton was shaken by invisible fingers to quiver and yet dance. Fire danced.

Dantanian Noir's fingertips danced along Draco's palm, like the aftertaste of a nightmare of wildfire, before his lips met Draco's own.

Dantanian tasted of blood. When he pulled back from the kiss, he was licking his lips.

The truth licks at the edges of the blood moon as the night returns to itself and the dragons return to their frames and the dead to their graves-

"Sectumsempra!" Draco yelled.

Death was in the air, like the ice crystal chill in high winter air that foretold snow.

Even as his fingers let go of the talon wand, letting it fall upon blood, to close around a vial in his pocket.

Harry was in flame, striding through the blue unhurt, fourteen and then sixteen, while voices called for his death. Draco's hands shook before he tasted both Harry and Dantanian in his lungs, while somewhere not too far away, Bellatrix's laughter was enough to make any fire break that was not beloved of the moon-

"Avada Kedavra!" Draco yelled.

Severus was rounding on him, pulling him back from voices that called for his head, voices and voices as the ground crumbled beneath and the pulse of summer burned and burned.

"What have you done, Draco?" Severus cried out wretchedly. "You promised me. You promised me! What have you *done*?"

Fire is green light. That is the secret of fire. Fire is nothing more or less than the green light of death, as something burns to make the light. The destruction of every small bit of matter in little fragments smaller than snowflakes in the brilliance of sun on snow as fire seeks the death of everyone and everything that has blood in its veins, fire hates any blood it cannot burn-

Hogwarts would never burn, or perhaps it could.

It was not a question of possibility, but will, as its burning hovered into being above it, all of its screams and blasts of light silenced, every broken stone erased by a falling shadow. A shadow with vast sweeping wings that erased the ruins where Hagrid's hut and steps to the Great Hall had once been. The shadow had a head so bright, it made the shadow shimmer, like lakelight on the walls of dungeons that might burn with the rest of this place that was once the center of the world.

Astaroth flew above Hogwarts in a firework of opal flame.

His head was long, with his snout fully forward, gray eyes wide, dizzy with the expanse of places to burn. Astaroth flapped his wings and wet palpitating shadow pulsed over Hogwarts like drums of peace or war. Hogwarts faced Astaroth at last, fire offered above, and fire eternally blooming beneath. Astaroth had burned fire into the foundations of Hogwarts already. Astaroth soared and thought of burning the blue itself from the sky of summer.

I can burn the Great Lake dry. There is nothing that cannot be burned.

Tonks was standing in front of a mirror, holding her stomach with a child inside made of fire.

Except it seemed Draco had mistaken her for her aunt.

Narcissa Malfoy was the face in the mirror, the Mirror of Ecidyrue risen before Narcissa with tears streaking the blood in falling patches over her face. Narcissa held her stomach and stared at the words on the mirror.

"Only one," Draco's mother read out, "May climb back out of hell." Then she turned and said, "When did we climb down?"

Fire was hellfire and hellfire was fire. The tautology beyond tautologies, if hell was suffering or other people. Hermione was reading from *The Tempest* with Ron's head leaned on her shoulder, and Harry was holding Draco's hand uncertainly in firelight.

"Hell is empty," Hermione read, "And the devils are here."

Draco reached forward and stole the book from her. "Hey!" she exclaimed in indignation, and Ron and Harry laughed as the shadow of the dragon fell upon them.

Draco's shadow was tall enough to blot away the flame, even as it soared at a wave of his haughty fingertips.

"No, Striker, this is the part I wanted Harry to hear. 'Full fathom five thy father lies. Of his bones are coral-'"

"Do you think Neville is still alive?" Ron blurted.

Draco dropped Hermione's book into the fire.

He was the words that burned, before she could cast Aguamenti and put the fire on it out.

But doth suffer a sea-change-

A sea-change.

Draco's hands held either side of Mirror of Ecidyrue between them, glass cold against his forehead as it reflected a different face.

Fire is snow.

Draco's hands were as covered in blood as his mother's face. They held a mirror covered in blood and gore, organs freshly ripped apart to bless the words *Even death-*

Fire is the siren call of the blood moon into these veins that fire will one day love.

The room was like the one in the Room of Requirement, and not like it. It was the room in Malfoy Manor where Draco had learned Occlumency.

Aunt Bella sat there in the chair where she had taught him, an obsidian dagger between her pale hands that reflected the fire.

She smiled, as the door closed, and Draco's footsteps came to a halt. She folded her hands, leaned forward, and asked with her askew smile,

"Were you expecting someone else?"

Draco only opened his eyes once the total eclipse had ended. Grindelwald gave him as long as he needed to learn how to breathe again, before he asked him what he had seen. Because surely he must have seen something, to stare into fire for so long-

"Nothing," Draco breathed, mind as fragmented as the view piece of any kaleidoscope. "A fat load of nothing. Nothing that makes *sense*." Grindelwald made a noise of disagreement.

Draco lifted his hands to be sure they were clean. They were, and were also cold, with the fire gone out.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing I can use."

Draco's sixth visit to Nurmengard was on the fourth, as the Portkey back to Britain neared. It marked an occasion which should have been at the fourth visit- the secrets of the final mirror.

"How are you doing, Kaktusblüte?" Grindelwald asked with every appearance of sympathy, even as he got cream from his Kaisermelange temporarily on his nose. "I might have pushed you too hard, powerful as you are. True pyromancy can be overwhelming for even-"

Draco had scarcely slept a wink. Bits of the vision were embers that could never be extinguished save by more time. Even as the words themselves rested, as easily on the pages as any other, in his sixth notebook. No, he was scarcely in a mood to humor the world's chattiest mass murderer. "Stop nattering and tell me what you promised. The third mirror."

"Espilce," Grindelwald corrected, and smiled at the death glare that earned him. "So we are to dispense with pleasantries. It seems staying up late does not agree with you." *Not when Viktor gets me up at six a.m. to go for a bloody* jog around der Block*, no.*

"Then I will be brief. We have exchanged so many words already, the virtue of concision might as well insert itself at this juncture. Well, the third mirror is one of the three Dantanian

had, and as you know, the only one he figured out how to properly use. But the properties of the mirror allow much more than the mere creation of Dementors-"

The mere creation of Dementors, as if they were discussing the unimportance of an intramural Quidditch friendly.

"Where's the whole story with the gravedigger's daughter?"

"The Mirror of Espilce is the least known and least understood of the three mirrors. Even as he used it to deadly effect, Dantanian wrote the least about it. A mere tenth of what he said of the other mirrors. There was only one reference to it besides, in the materials I found at Citadelle Xaphan. Dantanian Black wrote, *Of the Mirror of Espilce, the less said is better. I am of the unshakeable opinion that it should not have been made.*"

"Sounds like exactly my kind of mirror," Draco deadpanned.

Grindelwald's eyes sparked with humor. "When I was a young man like you, I thought the same thing. As much as anything else, my trip to New Zealand was in search of it." He put aside his food and began to speak more intently. "There *is* a story of this mirror, as relates to the other stories. It forms the end, although not much of an end. It will not satisfy you."

"Go on," Draco urged, curiosity peaked nonetheless.

"After Luna's mirror failed to deliver Sculptor his dream of Estella reborn, he left the house of Eros. Sculptor took his own life soon after, throwing himself into the river where a bridge had once taken him high over the grasp of Death. But the river was swollen over the banks, so Sculptor's body was not found for some time. Before then, Pavo was the only remaining of the brothers, in this world *and* at the house of Eros.

"Pavo, if you recall, is a constellation. Pavo the Hundred-Eyed, as myths recount of the origin of peacocks. I believe many pureblood traditions may stem from the legacy of Pavo, particularly those of Britain, without wizards today remembering. From naming by constellations to the keeping of peacocks." Draco remembered his Boggart in the blue loop and felt uneasy. "He was so influential because the myth called him a great wizard. Some say inventor, some say necromancer. Some say a generous man of charity, some say a cold-blooded killer. Some say he was the world's first truly good man, and some say he was the world's first ever Dark Lord. You can imagine which version I prefer.

"In any event, however dark his magic may have been, he seems to have been possessed by enough personal charms to render history's first witch desperately in love with him. Luna assisted him in his studies of magic, and even in what the story only calls 'passing strange' or 'more unusual experiments'. But however Hundred-Eyed, he had no eyes for *her*. So Luna seems to have resorted to desperate measures to make him stay, once he tired of the house of Eros and began to plan to go home. She told him Death had tricked his two brothers, and would him. So she would make him a third mirror. This one would work, she said, because unlike the others, he would be capable of using it properly, and have the patience.

"Pavo stayed- I imagine out of amusement if nothing else- and Luna made him the Mirror of Espilce, which she said would render the invisibility cloak a perfect Hallow, and truly protect

him from the eyes of Death and his grasp. She aimed high, for a mirror that could not just absorb light from the world around it, but pull light from the sky, the sun and the moon and stars. As her name suggests, she seems only to have succeeded with the moon. Perhaps she should have consulted with Sola.

"In any event, the Mirror of Espilce could be used to make an eclipse. But it could do more, and the pull of what more the mirror could do led Pavo away nonetheless, down the path towards the world. And- that is all. Luna and her mother found the body of the second brother and buried him, then lived together until they died. Pavo ended as the tale of the Hallows tells, successful, and eventually marrying a different woman, who gave him a son that inherited both the cloak and mirror.

"If it is a fable, it is of the foolishness of love. Luna may as well have handed over her heart whole to Pavo- *control of the moon and its light*- and Pavo walked away ungrateful, forgetting her quickly. Some say it was the possession of that third mirror that *did* let him live a long life, and only die when he chose, rather than fall prey to Death's deceptions. Just as her mother created the first wand, and Luna created magic and witches and wizards, Luna created too an unspeakably precious thing, out of love. But he took it as a weapon, no better or worse than if she had bought him a blade. And one does not worry over much of the origin of most blades. Simply of their sharpness."

"What is the mirror *like,* though? How am I supposed to find it if-"

"That part is easy. I have it."

"What?" Draco demanded. Grindelwald let the decorated stone room echo his yell in smug silence. If not perhaps the echo there would have been before Draco made the larger window. "What do you mean, *you* have it? You don't have anything! You mean it's in your possessions? Because those were ransacked, and Dantanian's memories were found and taken, but the third mirror was nowhere to be found. All else you *have* is in this castle-"

"Exactly. *In this castle.* Do listen, please, this will make this clearer. If you had asked, I would have told you at any time. I came into possession of the Mirror of Espilce, as you know, and kept it for some time. I did not succeed in my first experiment to make a Dementor, but with a later experiment I did. I suspect because I had gained possession of the Elder Wand. Before, the mirror had not done anything particularly magical or interesting. After, when I tapped it with my wand, the symbol of the Hallows would appear glowing between words. It is a small mirror, very unlike the other two. Not much larger than my palm."

He held up his hand, and Draco tried to imagine one of these ghastly mirrors having the same gravitas if it was pocket-sized. Not an easy task.

"I completed many experiments with it over the years. I did not only make and control Dementors, I controlled the moon. For instance, I could summon a false blood moon if I wished, if not a true one. Oh, you wouldn't believe how it makes poor unfortunate souls tremble, to watch the cackling, diabolical dark lord blot out the moon and turn it red!"

"Excellent for branding purposes," Draco said numbly.

"Exactly," Grindelwald beamed. "Eventually, though, I realized it was less a gift, and more a curse. After a serious accident, I decided it must be destroyed."

Any detached part of Draco abruptly woke up. "You? *You* tried to destroy it? Something that gave you more *power?* What was this accident?"

"That," Grindelwald said evenly, "I will not tell you yet. But I will tell you what became of the mirror. That is what matters. Anyway, I failed in every attempt to destroy it. I imagine they all might be indestructible." *As if I'm going to give you the satisfaction of telling you you're right.* "Eventually, I knew I had to hide it instead, somewhere it would never be found."

"Where?"

"Were you not listening?" Grindelwald sighed like an exasperated parent. "Where I put everything I owned that I wished to confine and keep secret, but not wipe off the earth. Nurmengard."

Draco's face broke into an involuntary smile, but Grindelwald got this condescending little smirk at the sight. Draco closed his mouth.

"You will not be able to simply look around and find it. I took more precautions. It is a mirror of concealment by its nature, tied to the invisibility cloak, so it has a mechanism, so to speak, in itself for its secreting. When you come to visit me, you surely notice the room beneath the staircases with the vaulted ceiling, and the artifacts with the Hallows. I hope at least some remain. For your sake, I hope there remains a great stone basin, with the Hallows on it, at the room's center. That is where the Mirror of Espilce can be found. And that is only sometimes. The ritual I completed has cast it to *nowhere*. Unless a certain ritual is done on a very certain time, there is no retrieving the third mirror."

"Are you going to tell me when this is possible?"

"The same time as I did the ritual to seal it there," Grindelwald said with every appearance of forthright good-heartedness. "What is the mirror called?" he prompted. Draco made a threatening gesture that encouraged yet more forthrightness. "Very well. The total lunar eclipse."

Draco was silent for so long it felt he had passed out. There was a ringing in his ears, or perhaps a roaring. "The eclipse," he finally said, and Grindelwald nodded. "The blood moon." Another nod. "Your beloved Blutmond." Nod again. "A ritual has to be done, to get the third mirror. *A ritual at Nurmengard during the total lunar eclipse?*"

"Kaktusblüte," Grindelwald observed, "I fear you are becoming a bit agitated."

"YOU BASTARD! YOU LYING FUCKING BASTARD!"

Draco got up and leaned out of the window, trying to let the icy air calm himself, trying to tell himself murdering Grindelwald would be counterproductive. However much it would make

sense to add another life to his tally with Death, and how damn good it seemed it would feel at the moment.

"You treacherous piece of shit," he marveled, and any calming felt impossible. He didn't know if he'd ever been quite *this* angry. The lit torches on the wall, he could feel, had their flames doubling in height, even before he whirled on Grindelwald.

"You are always quite fetching, Draco. But it seems you are at your *most* magnetic when angry."

"You couldn't have told me about the mirror and some goddamn ritual *last night*? You must have had such a good laugh, doing a *different* ritual with me, all the while knowing that the one I needed could have-"

"If you recall," Grindelwald said, patient as a saint, "The initial plan *was* to discuss the Mirror of Espilce, yesterday morning. It was your agitation, at the revelations about the second mirror, that required that discussion's postponement-"

"Oh, so it's *my* fault?" Draco snarled. He put on a show of sneering, even as a part of him began to reel at how monumentally he'd screwed up. "Bastard! BASTARD! I *should* kill you for this!"

"Kill me," Grindelwald said confidently, "And all knowledge and ability to retrieve the Mirror of Espilce dies with me."

After that chilling statement, he took on a more soothing tone. "Come, there isn't any need to be *so* down. You said there were two total lunar eclipses this year. The other one is..."

He trailed off, and Draco wanted to burn the entire world down, from just how badly he knew he had been played.

"As if you don't remember! *September*!"

"Ah. I can't say it won't be a pleasure to have that to look forward to."

Absolution

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! -wave- I'm back from hiatus, I think. I apologize for dropping off the map for a while. I had a lot of mental health issues that to be honest, I'm still grappling with, but I've been missing this story a lot, and I want to start updating again. I am doing better. I should be able to update every week or so, although don't worry about me if it's later, because it might be. I promise to announce if I'm going on a hiatus again.

Thanks so much for all of your kind messages of concern and understanding, they've really helped me. Thanks to everyone, and I hope you enjoy.

Playlist

After Nurmengard, the crumbling towers of Xaphan looked almost welcoming. Except they were not quite as crumbling as they had been. More towers had risen, tall and true, to the point there was a genuinely full area of the castle looking restored, immediately behind the drawbridge. Aside, of course, from the pesky issue of a ceiling. The library tower remained more isolated, still flanked on every side by rubble that reminded Draco of different times there. But no one more troubling than Gilderoy awaited this time.

Except perhaps the greater share of the repair could be attributed to the presence of Gilderoy's visitor. He must have been coming often during the spring break. It was, of course, Severus, whose presence made Draco hastily close the tower door as soon as he opened it. Just a fleeting glimpse of sallow skin and dark hair, along with the intelligent purr of that unmistakable voice, had Draco's heart going mad, and not from fear of discovery.

Being found here by Severus or not, it was much of the same, whatever suspicions of plotting it might arouse in Draco's godfather. Because he would not *remain* that godfather for much more than a year longer. Either godfather or godson would be removed from the equation.

Neither man inside seemed to notice, though Gilderoy knew Draco was planning to come check in at sunset. But in fairness, once Draco carefully eased the door open a crack to spy, it did seem Gilderoy was trying. Severus just looked very comfortable in his armchair, with Gilderoy perched on its arm no apparent obstacle to that comfort. No matter how transparent his hints were towards Severus's departure.

"Really, er, it is getting late, it must be near sunset soon..."

Gilderoy glanced in the direction of a window, filtering in more low and golden light. Sunset was the arranged hour of his meeting with Draco.

"You have the attention span of a soused Niffler," Severus observed, though his sharp gaze was softened by that unusual feel of comfort to him. "I am trying to assist *you* here, as it happens."

"Well, yes, and I'm, ah, very grateful, but..."

Severus looked over Gilderoy critically. "You went on about the crystal dome so long, we haven't been able to discuss the progression of your scars."

"We have, though- I've told you, they haven't meaningfully changed, so..."

"Pardon me if I do not take your judgment as gospel. Truly no alteration since last Sunday, despite the additions made to the solution? And you have been assiduous in its application?" His eyes ran up and down the lean form perched beside him, a stare of clinical and scientific assessment that would have made more sense if he could have seen Gilderoy's scars through his clothing.

Gilderoy squirmed under that gaze, threatening to upset his precarious perch. "Not, well, ah, meaningfully," he said, sticking to that word like a byline. "I am getting a bit peckish as well..."

"Go on, then, prepare us supper." Severus waved an arm imperiously, a neat gesture of his plain black sleeve as if ordering a Defense student to demonstrate a spell. But there was indulgence in his dark eyes, a humor that did not belong on his face around Gilderoy. Yet it had come to be there, and in a short time.

"What?" Gilderoy squawked.

Severus laughed, a low rich sound like a cello's bow drawn across the strings while tuning. "Was that not an invitation to dinner you just gave me?" He tilted his head at an almost facetious incline. "Or did I mishear you? Do let me know. Poor hearing *would* be an occupational hazard for a spy."

"N-no, your hearing is fine, just..." Gilderoy did not seem able to withstand Severus, even when it was just- was that playfulness? In its face, Gilderoy was such an incoherent, flushing mess, they were all lucky he hadn't lost his head and declared his love- but wait, hadn't he?

No. Draco had seen him say he loved Severus, on his knees as he begged for forgiveness, but that had been in the fire. A portent along with many.

"Then why am I not being lavished with your culinary *expertise*? Before that, we have yet to have any useful update on the progression of the healing project. Very well, if you are incapable of articulating, I will inspect for myself."

Gilderoy blinked dewily, uncomprehending. Severus's keen dark eyes narrowed. He made another imperious gesture, this one up and down Gilderoy's body. "Up!" Gilderoy stumbled

to his feet. "Well?"

Gilderoy's hands went to the top button on his shirt, looking scarcely able to breathe. "You want me to- to show you my scars?"

"Have you not done so before? You may be accused of many things in your life and times," Severus said, with audible relish in teasing, "But never of being *modest.* From whence this bashfulness now?" *Probably because he suspects, correctly, that your godson is hidden nearby, waiting to talk to him.* "What effect do you imagine will unfold from this unveiling?"

Gilderoy was speechless, tongue sliding nervously over his lips. His eyes had gone very wide.

Severus looked to mistake Gilderoy's reluctance as from a darker source, given whatever he knew of the history there. "Gilderoy," he said more softly, corner of his mouth turning up ruefully. He slid to his feet, voice of an unfathomable gentleness. "A jest. I have no intention of frightening you." He told Gilderoy, "You should know that I would never hurt you."

Draco pushed the door shut as quietly as he could. Then he rushed away from the tower, taking refuge in the closest section of castle that put a roof and walls around him. He grasped onto an unlit torch and felt his nails slide over the old wood and threaten splinters. He was more worried about getting glass in his other palm, as he forced down the draught of peace from his pocket.

"What have you done." He let his head fall against the cold stone, harder than he meant to. *Stop banging your head into walls, Draco, even Dobby doesn't do that anymore.* "What have you done, Draco Black? What the fuck have you done?"

What he had done to Gilderoy- and what had Draco done to *Severus*?

Maybe there was something there, and not just on Gilderoy's side.

And maybe- and this thought was just as constricting and stinging- whether or not it was romantic, Severus had actually found that most rare and unthinkable of things for him- a *friend?*

I'm going to have to choose. Me or Severus. Orpheus or Eurydice. Only one may climb back out of hell.

Gilderoy found Draco sitting on the ground with the torch laid across his lap, aimlessly playing with a flame at its end. No visions had been forthcoming from its flickering, but what had Draco expected? Some newfound brilliance at pyromancy to provide an image of May 1998 and the war over, with either himself or Severus walking the world above ground? No, the fire had not been there to make the choice for him. Only to swirl in heatless tendrils around his fitful fingers, in the way Harry liked to- had used to like to- play with Draco's hair.

"Sorry about that," Gilderoy said breathlessly. "I had some, er, difficulty getting Severus to leave..."

He looked to expect teasing or admonition, but Draco had little heart for it. "Here." Draco got to his feet, putting the torch back on the wall. He waved his hand, and it went bright enough to see clearly.

Gilderoy squinted downwards, only to do a double-take once he processed the location and contents of the Polaroid in his hand. "Is that..."

"Yup," Draco said, a smug satisfaction in his voice he didn't feel.

Gilderoy brought the picture closer to his face. "This is that Muggle photograph you were planning to use, as evidence you'd really... but what is it that you're doing behind his head?"

"Oh, that? Bunny ears." Draco put up two fingers and held them behind his own head in demonstration. "It's a Muggle thing. A joke. It's just a childish thing they do in pictures sometimes. To make like the other person's a bunny."

"Grindelwald doesn't look like a bunny at all."

"Oh, never mind," Draco laughed more honestly this time. "I have more."

Gilderoy was not long at studying them before his gaze rose back, unexpectedly gloomy. "So. You did it. You made it to Nurmengard. I imagine Miss Granger will be quite cross you met with Grindelwald, but I think she knew you would."

"Try not to overexert yourself celebrating my victory. What, do you fear her wrath that much- *oh.*"

"I am very glad you're not dead. And I hope you've gotten the answers you wanted. But if you were successful, that means- there *was* a promise made if you were, of refuge here for..."

"For Karkaroff."

Gilderoy looked to be contemplating the potential poisons one might find in a deserted castle on short notice. "Yes. For Karkaroff. So he has to hear of all this…"

"And then," Draco said, with a sense of heavy obligation, "So does Aberforth Dumbledore."

"What am I supposed to be seeing here, boy?"

"The results of your assistance." Draco flashed a rakish grin. "Grindelwald."

Aberforth squinted down at the Polaroid doubtfully. "That's just you with your ghastly new hair, and some unfortunate old man you're accosting."

Okay, maybe this was not the ironclad proof he'd envisioned. There *was* the fact that very few had seen Grindelwald in over a decade. And there had been a great many decades since his defeat, or the publication of any contemporary images of him.

"It's Grindelwald," Draco insisted. "I used the information you gave me, and this is where it took me. I went to Nurmengard and talked to Grindelwald."

"Stop saying that name!" Aberforth hissed. He picked up a candle and drew Draco into the private part of the Hog's Head, even though the pub had already been closed by the time Draco arrived.

Draco's legs were heavy beneath him. He'd had to make a Portkey to travel to L'Infern and back. Karkaroff had thankfully elected to stay put, believing the place safe and fearing detection at Xaphan with more visitors. It had certainly been a relief for his prospective host.

But still, the travel was wearing after so much recently. Draco told himself he would stay at Hogwarts for the foreseeable future, save normal Sunday visits to Xaphan. He'd stay near his friends, near Harry. He only had to push himself a little further.

So he forced his legs to work and followed Aberforth up the steps, knowing it the way to the secret passage. He hoped he wasn't about to be ejected immediately for being a lunatic.

"Why shouldn't I say his name, though?" Draco whined once they were up the stairs. "I know he was, like, a Dread Dark Lord. But he's not *Voldemort.*"

"Around my brother," Aberforth said grimly, "You'd be far better off saying Voldemort's name. The Order has been using the passage into Hogwarts, and-"

"That's right, I heard. You actually had to talk to your brother for that, right? So are you and Albus *not* actively seeking each other's deaths anymore?"

"Stop being flippant, boy." Aberforth came to a stop in the parlor, where the portrait of Ariana Dumbledore stared out with her pretty vacant eyes, eternally young. "If Albus wanted me gone, I'd have been moldering in the ground for decades already. Now what *new* madness have you inflicted upon this earthly sphere?"

"Madness? Come *on*. You're the one who told me to do all the damage I could."

Aberforth regarded him with those unsettlingly bright blue eyes for a long interval. "Aye, and you imagine that," he gestured crudely to the Polaroid, "Is what I had in mind?" Draco managed not to flinch. "I can't imagine how you ever managed to get into that godforsaken place, let alone get that monster to cooperate with you. You shouldn't believe a damn word he said, you know. Not a one."

At least Draco'd had the sense not to lead with the bunny ears one this time. "I came here to thank you," he said more seriously, "For all your help, Aberforth. I did- put the letter you gave me to use, and it helped me find the answers I needed. Well- some of them, but- that's not the point. What it is, it's that I owe you a debt, and if you're ever in trouble or need a

favor, you know where to find me." Aberforth remained silent. "What?" Draco pouted. "A favor from a wizard as powerful as me is no small thing to-"

"*Why did you go see Grindelwald*?"

"The Deathly Hallows."

Aberforth looked liable to begin banging his head against the wall now. "Of all the bloody nuisances- am I ever to be free of hearing about those damned *Hallows*-"

"And about my wand. Grindelwald is the one who had it made."

"*Bellatrix Lestrange's* wand?"

"I'm not here to freak you out." Draco had pulled out the talon wand to demonstrate, but he pocketed it along with the photographs. "I just wanted to tell you something I learned on my little excursion to the Austrian Alps that I thought..." *I thought might interest you*, he almost said, but Aberforth was right. There were some subjects you just *couldn't* be flippant about. "I thought you deserved to know. Just hear me out, alright? And then I'll get out of your hair, and I won't ever ask for another favor-"

"I'll believe that when I see it," Aberforth said wryly, and settled into his chair. "Go on."

Draco stayed standing, not entirely confident that so much as mentioning this hornet's nest wouldn't get him cursed or worse. "I asked him about your sister." He waited to see if Aberforth would draw his wand, but he just settled deeper into his chair, looking like the one who'd been hexed. "About- the way she died. I asked him if he knew who had done it."

"You- you can't be sure of anything he says," Aberforth said fiercely, hands clenching to fists in his lap around his old ragged gray robes. A universe of pain was forming its constellations all through the room, more solid than the three people in it, or at least the two men. Ariana watched on, unmoved.

"I can, though," Draco said confidently. He *was* confident he was right, as he faced the man whose life had ended the day his sister died, and told him the truth about that death. "Because he didn't tell me everything. He just told me who it wasn't."

"Himself, I take it," Aberforth spat virulently.

"You."

Aberforth's wrinkled old lips parted wordlessly.

It felt unexpectedly momentous, an act that had occurred to him offhand at his arrival in Hogsmeade. It went from an incidental benefit to something real.

Maybe it was even something that Draco would have thought, *Yes, this, this is what I was brought back in time to do.* If he hadn't have known the real reason.

"He wouldn't exculpate himself or your *brother*. He claimed he didn't know which it had been. But he said he knew it hadn't been *you*. And if he had been going to just lie, it wouldn't make any sense to clear you but leave himself as a possibility. I could tell it's the truth that you're not guilty. You're *not*." Aberforth's knuckles had gone so white, Draco feared he would faint. "I wouldn't lie about this. I'm telling the truth when I say *you did not kill your sister.*"

"Oh," Aberforth gasped. His shoulders heaved and his composure broke, a wave tearing through with the force of the understanding. "*Oh.* Ariana. *Ariana.* I didn't- I really didn't..."

"You didn't, Aberforth. I promise." Draco knew it had to be bittersweet.

Aberforth looked so wracked with the shock of it, he seemed beyond tears, blue eyes dawning with something Draco realized he had never seen in them- something almost like hope.

"It wasn't me," Aberforth gasped, and nearly doubled in half, collapsing upon himself, even as it seemed a weight had been lifted off his back that he had been carrying for a lifetime. "Oh, Merlin, I never knew... I struck Albus at her funeral, so he must have thought I blamed him, and I *did*... blamed him for bringing that evil man into our lives, our family... but I could never be sure who had struck the blow that *killed* her- I thought I would *never* know if I'm the one who did it, if I failed her, if I killed my poor sweet little sister with my own hands-"

"You didn't strike the blow," Draco said gently, a lump come to his own throat again. He could only imagine how it must feel to have, that deep and real an absolution. "Your hands are clean, Aberforth. Her blood is not on them. It never has been. You don't have to wonder. You don't have to feel guilty anymore."

"So-" Aberforth's face lifted, shoulders squaring. "So it was Grindelwald?" Draco blinked, trying not to give anything away. "If he knows it wasn't me, he must know who it *was.* Why else would he not tell, between him and Albus? He wasn't willing to try and lie, because you might catch him, but- it was him, wasn't it? It- it wasn't Albus, either." That seemed to have stripped the last weight finally away. "It wasn't my brother," Aberforth marveled. He sounded almost as relieved to hear that as he had his own innocence.

Grindelwald had shaken Draco's faith in his own abilities at lying, to be sure. But some lies were too important to not at least give his best. "You're right. I'm sure it was Grindelwald."

Aberforth exhaled a breath it sounded he had been holding for decades. "Oh, Gods. Oh, Gods. Oh, our sweet Ariana. Oh, our poor little sister," he breathed. "We just- we should have protected her. We didn't. We're still- we're still so guilty, there will never be redemption, never, for none of us, but- it was Grindelwald who *ended* her life." Draco nodded. "I didn't kill her," Aberforth said finally, after another long pause of unguessable thought, and slowly, eyes focusing on Draco again, his lips turned up in a smile.

"I didn't kill my little sister."

When Draco stepped out of the passage into the Room of Requirement, he was not alone. The Room had been shaped into the small room with armchairs and a fire that he had used for Occlumency training with Harry, a room that seemed to welcome him still. The once-green chair was blue. And in the Gryffindor-red armchair, Harry was there, his lap piled with homework he was not doing. His glasses had slipped down his face. He'd fallen asleep. And there was a parchment on his lap, in all likelihood better than Draco could have done.

Marie Weston **- <u>Cygnus Black</u> -** Ella Carrow Cordula Flint - *<u>Abraxas Malfoy</u>* - Iphigenia Lovegood

(illegitimate) + **+ (legitimate)** *(legitimate)*+ + *(legitimized)*

Jackson Shaw **- Astarte Noir Phineas -** Ursula Flint *John Potter - Selene* *Nicholas* - 'Amelie'

(Muggle) + (illegitimate) + + +

<u>Dantanian Noir</u> Sirius, Phineas, <u>Cygnus</u>... Lamia Periander - *<u>Dorian Scorpius</u>*

\+ + +

McMillan **- Arcturus** Crabbe **- Pollux** *Scorpius Abraxas*

\+ + +

Orion - Walburga, Cygnus - Druella Rossier *Abraxas*

\+ + +

Sirius, Regulus Bellatrix, Andromeda, Narcissa - *Lucius*

\+

<u>Draco Black</u>

The handwriting wasn't Harry's. But Draco recognized it anyway.

He stumbled and drew his clumsy leg against Harry's knee. Harry awoke to him with a smile. There was no accusation in those green eyes behind their clouded frames, not even when he noticed the direction of Draco's stare.

"Are you shocked? Luna made it for me," Harry said, voice and gaze steady. Say this for the Boy Who Lived, he didn't tend to tarry in letting Draco in on *his* secrets. "Over break. She

came to visit us and wouldn't leave. She told me everything. I know you were telling the truth."

Draco must have looked much like Aberforth had tonight. Flummoxed, with a touch of comedy he could feel in himself, as he inwardly flailed. What was it that Viktor had said about Harry? *He knows you're no angel*?

Oh, but there's a distance, isn't there, from there to the devil?

If the devil could ever be found staring his own death in the face, in the presence of the one who most made him not want to die.

"Draco," Harry said, breaking Draco's stricken silence. "I'm saying I know you really went to Nurmengard, alright? Where they're keeping Grindelwald-" He hesitated, and asked with a Gryffindorish show of irreverence, "Is that a name you're not supposed to say, like Voldemort's? I've never been clear on that."

"You can just say it," Draco said automatically.

"I believe you." Harry watched as Draco collapsed into the blue chair before him. "You really did go off to the continent to..." Harry shook his head in admiring amazement. "*Rob Grindelwald.* So when you said that- you *were* trying to stop lying to me."

"Luna corroborated it all," Draco said, reasoning it out for his own benefit. Harry nodded, looking repentant for his previous lack of faith. "Don't say you're sorry you were wrong, though, because it was still my fault. It was all my fault. Like that Muggle story- the boy who cried wolf." Harry laughed at that reference from Draco, eyes sparkling. Draco's chest hurt like it had watching Severus promise Gilderoy he would never hurt him.

Harry, who had somehow come to believe in him still, at the worst possible time. And here Draco was, irresponsibly chasing more of that belief. "I brought proof, if you want it, anyway," he said as planned, and deposited a Polaroid in Harry's grasp. Harry peered at it with bemusement, while Draco used the opportunity to seize the parchment with the family tree and look at the story it told: the invisible red lines trailing up and then down again, from Dantanian and Dorian, to where they met and proved themselves to have just been one line instead all along- in the person of Draco Black.

"If you really mean to be open... Is that old man *Grindelwald*? Are you giving him bunny ears?" Draco nodded, glad the gesture had photographed, and Harry looked more fondly exasperated than surprised. "Oh, I figured you would do this. So did Luna. Even though according to her, you promised Hermione you weren't even going to *talk* to him."

Draco had to scoff at that, and then fight the urge to bump at Harry's calf with his shoe- too flirtatious and personal, from someone virtually a walking ghost, or something worse than a ghost- something capable of that order of magnitude of selfishness. "It's like you said, none of you lot actually thought I'd pass up by the chance. Even Hermione didn't *really* believe I wouldn't. Don't be disappointed in me for *that*, you have so many superior options."

"Luna was right. I can see it even more in a picture like this. I might not have recognized you," Harry mused. When Draco tilted his head quizzically, Harry held up the picture for him obligingly, presenting Draco the ghastly vision of himself. "With that hair, you do look just like Dantanian Noir."

At least Draco would be spared the decision of whether to continue anything romantic, maybe even anything friendly with the Boy Who Lived. A Pensieve had made the choice for him.

He must have started breathing with less regularity, as the sharp acid hunted feeling that jabbed right behind his eyes was reflected by Harry's alarm. "Draco? Draco, it's okay. Don't panic, but yes, I saw Dantanian's memories. She had to give me them, to make me really understand why you'd acted the way you had this year. She said- she thought I had a right to know." Harry sounded defensive of Luna, of all the minutiae to distract them now. As if Draco could truly muster up an ounce of acrimony towards Luna no matter what she had done or ever would do, now that he knew his time with her could be so much more limited.

"A right to see it," Draco echoed, not sure if he meant to be comforting. "Well, yes, I suppose most would deserve to look upon the true face of the man who ruined their life."

He shook his head to Harry's obvious question of *Dantanian*? He made an elegant sweeping circle in the air, a neat circuit of his own face.

"What do you mean?"

Draco tried to neither panic nor erupt in anger. He might have failed, if Harry's steady gaze did not exert such an anchor on him. "Didn't Luna tell you the best part- what my wand is, what that vow to Hecate meant-"

"You didn't ruin my life, you're mad. The number of times you've saved it- dragon, I don't mean times you saved me from *death*, either-"

"I didn't want you to see what I did, bringing you into my family," Draco said bleakly, and saw himself in his mind's eye getting up and leaving the room, though of course he didn't. "I didn't want you to know that this whole time, I've been bound to murder them and you, for-"

"I don't believe that curse has the power you think it does," Harry said, and Draco couldn't help but admire the unyielding set of his jaw in the firelight.

"*You* wouldn't."

"Luna doesn't either," Harry protested, and Draco had to heavily roll his eyes, if not with the slow panache of Severus. Draco's fan club were perhaps not the best of judges.

"Hey, maybe it won't come into play," Draco mused aloud, and fortunately, Harry didn't ask what that meant.

But it put Draco half in the conversation, half out of it, because he didn't know why he hadn't thought of this before: *If I die, what becomes of Dantanian Noir*? What would be done with

the talon wand? Who would get it? What if it was Voldemort who managed to claim it, and in saving Severus, Draco damned the entire world? Then was Draco meant to destroy the wand, raze the last remnants of Dantanian from the earth before he too was erased?

"Draco, look at me, don't go into your head again. That's why you didn't speak to me for a month? You didn't think I would accept you?"

"You accept that part of me is *Dantanian.*"

"Part of me is Voldemort, isn't it?" Harry left Draco without easy retort. "You know there's that connection. In my dreams. In the graveyard. And Dantanian- he did monstrous things, but he was no Tom Riddle. More than Voldemort... Dantanian reminded me of myself." *Because he was an orphan? Or because you think you could turn as dark as him, if the world took what you loved most but made the mistake of leaving you alive in it?*

"You probably saw it too." Draco had seen no such thing. "You know everything about me. You've been at my side and in my head for the worst of it all." Harry's speech took on a more regular and yet strained tone, like he'd spent a while thinking about these words but found their speaking unexpectedly difficult. "You couldn't trust me enough to do the same? To give the chance to l- to accept you, the way you've always accepted me? When you were the only person I could tell about... something dark, inside me? Because it's there, you know it is-"

"You don't deserve to be around someone who has anything like *Dantanian* inside him-"

"If you start up about deserving, I swear-" Harry's eyes looked frustrated enough to be remembering the way they had ended off fourth year together. "Leave that aside. Aren't we friends? Couldn't you trust me as one of your best friends, to know you well enough to be sure that whatever your secrets, you're *good*-" Such momentous words, on a matter so very much as yet undecided. But Harry brushed past them as if already written in stone, towards another uncertainty. "Except that's been the problem all along, hasn't it? We aren't friends, we never were, not truly."

Draco's throat no longer was threatening to close, not now that he had this unexpected reprieve about Dantanian. But it did choke up at that, with an almost worse feeling. *If you're going to reject me, reject me because I'm Dantanian, not because I'm me.* "That sounds like something Remus would say. What, we're not as good as him and Uncle Sirius because we weren't best mates first like the bloody Marauders-"

"No, he didn't," Harry protested loyally, "Though you are right that I talked about you and me a lot, to Remus. It feels like all I did over break was talk and talk, till my throat hurt, and it's all I can do even now, but- it's paralyzing when you're such a mystery, Draco, all of us just trying to puzzle out anything that puts us on solid ground. You're like this riddle I have to solve-" He held up a hand. "I swear, no pun intended. It's harder than any of the riddles into Ravenclaw. You know it is."

"Maybe it doesn't have an answer."

Harry shook his head. "No, just- listen, please- Remus helped me realize how you've always kept me at arm's length, calling us rivals and all- and I was just as bad. I did the opposite. I

put you on a pedestal, really, but I didn't mean to-"

Merlin, it was like Harry had been hauled to a Mind Healer. Meanwhile, Draco had been confessing all his secrets to Grindelwald.

"Is this a break-up monologue? Because before you bring this analysis to its natural close, at least consider two relevant pieces of information. One, I don't *want* to break up, not at all-" It was news to Draco himself as he said it, but he found himself tripping over his words then at Harry's involuntary smile. "And two, this, er, this- next great young dark lord look," Draco gestured to his hair, "Is soon to be gone, so..."

"I don't."

"You want to be with me again?" Draco leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, and gave Harry his undivided attention.

"Don't look at me like that. It makes it harder."

"Isn't that the idea?"

Harry buried his own flustered face in his hands. "Oh my God. That is so stupid. How can you make something that stupid sound sexy? Why do you have to be so *cool*?" Thankfully, the prophesied savior of the wizarding world managed to compose himself before going on any further in that vein. "No, Draco- I think it was right for us to, just, um, take a break for now, so maybe for the first time- we can actually try and be friends, without me always being so- distracted- it's the right thing to do. *I* want to actually know *you*. Not just the other way around."

Maybe Draco should have told him that was impossible, but instead he found himself as immature and snippy as if the fate of the world rested upon how soon he could get Harry into bed again. "Any idea how long this break is supposed to take? Did Remus dictate that too?"

"No, this is what *I* think," Harry insisted, then softened at something he seemed to see on Draco's face. "Dragon, it's not that I want anything or anyone else. I think I just need some more time to- I don't know, clear my head..."

"You know how I clear my head," Draco said cavalierly. "I take it you wouldn't want me with anyone else either-"

"No! Of course not! You haven't-"

"Don't get jealous, not-boyfriend..."

"You're trying to make me jealous," Harry protested, accurately. "That's too easy. Bad dragon," he said lightly. The rebuke hit an unexpected place in Draco, one that made him meet Harry's gaze with deferentially lowered eyelashes and a demon behind them, a heat that seemed to double the work of the fire beside them. Harry hastily averted his gaze.

"What, are you expecting me to stake my claim?"

Even Draco's pettiness failed, in the face of a deeper feeling than lust or the mere satisfaction of leverage. *Why should I make him suffer at all if he doesn't have to?* "Already subject to claim of possession, as it happens." He fished out the necklace to show to Harry, initials glinting as if being magicked into the air before the firelight. "Without any intention to contest or appeal it."

"And that isn't changing," Harry said heatedly, as Draco thought, *Maybe I'll die with these initials around my neck.*

"I won't change it. It never will. Not unless you want it to. Listen, I'm sorry if I haven't been a good enough friend to you, or- a friend at all, really, and I haven't trusted you enough, I know, but- I swear I've *loved* you enough. More than enough. I'm not planning on ever loving anyone else."

Harry looked like he desperately wanted to kiss Draco, a vibration between them like a pull at a tightened red thread linked invisibly between their hanging fingertips, as real as the line from Dorian to Dantanian.

But whatever world of passion Draco read into those firelit green eyes, Harry's words were more circumspect.

"I, er, think very highly of you as well."

Harry quickly wilted at the force of the glare that provoked. "Okay, now I want you to *talk* to me. I want to hear about Dantanian, all you know- not from Luna like before, right from your mouth- I want to hear about Nurmengard from you *first.* Tell me about Grindelwald!"

"Your wish is my command," Draco purred, with a sultry look that earned an admonishing one in return. "I know. I'm a bad dragon. Well, the first thing you need to know is that our relationship is not exactly the only thing I've fucked up recently. There's the small matter of an eclipse."

"So the lunar eclipse, that's when it has to be," Ginny reasoned out, finishing Draco's tale for him. "And he tells you the morning *after* the lunar eclipse."

"And that's bad?" Neville surmised.

"I'll have to wait until September!" Draco wrote the month's offending name out in large indignant letters on the board Hermione had brought for his explanations. The ignominious month finished the massive scrawling web he'd drawn them, from the Hallows to Dantanian to Grindelwald. The board would be burned before they left the room, it had been decided, however much Luna had wished to keep it as a souvenir. "Does this strike you all as the sort of situation that can be safely put on hold until *September*?"

His irritation echoed through the Room of Hidden Things, with the six figures around him hardly fitting objects for it. That Tuesday night felt at once too short and to stretch eternal,

with their shadows projected high up towards the ceiling like they were being sucked towards something unnatural. The shadow of the board was one solid mass of useless darkness.

"Wait, why?" Neville interjected. "Merlin, I'm so confused."

"Get with it, Neville." Ron's face was set in determination after the story he'd just heard. "Cut past the fancy bit, forget the mumblygook, what it comes down to is, Draco wants this mirror tied to his wand. A mirror only the old German sod's got a way to get hold of. And Draco missed his chance to get it from him. Now he's got to worry whether someone else- like, say, You Know Who..."

"Or," Hermione said, her hand in Ron's, "Less Naufragiam-stricken associates..."

"That gloomy gothic lot," Ron helpfully explained, "Could get a hold of the sod from inside the great old mountain prison and pull him right out from under us, sod off with him and all his know-how and mirror ritual before we can."

"But- none of the adults know *anything* about this?" Neville marveled. *It is terrible, Neville, really and truly it is. A whole other front for the war to be fought on.*

Luna looked rather pale, and not just from the cavernous room's irregular light. "My love, Severus is the only grown-up who even knows about *Dantanian.*"

And yes, Draco was *so* fond of having *Ginny Weasley* know that story too.

"No one else, yeah, and no one else is gonna, not even in the Order. Secret evil mirror from secret evil wizard is, well, secret, wotsit?"

"Oh, Ronald, you do explain things so succinctly," Luna complimented him sincerely. "Nev, will it be too hard not to tell Frank and Alice..."

"Oh- I hadn't thought of- no, I wouldn't tell on Draco, though," Neville stammered, looking eager to assert his loyalties. "Nor on any of you-"

"Good. Cause snitches get stitches!" Draco tried to lighten the mood going *pew, pew* in the air with his finger guns. He took out Neville and blew at the end of his index finger after. When he saw Harry staring with a compromising intensity, he winked. Harry flushed and stared very determinedly at the parchment on his lap.

"Draco Lupin Black, no more Muggle films for you," Hermione said, unimpressed.

Neville, though, left his chair to instinctively cower behind Luna. "Er..."

There was a laugh in Ginny's voice that left it before her question was done. "Sorry, I'm new to all this, but the one thing I don't get is why the whole, um, moon Dementor mirror is so important?"

"Come off it, Ginny, you, that's-" Ron's momentum left him. "Well, er, actually I'm not clear on that myself. Is it that we can't let it fall into the hands of the enemy, and they might get it from Grindelwald if we don't?"

"Or is there something *we* have to do with it?" Ginny pressed cannily.

"Oh, you think once we've got it," Ron caught on swiftly, "Draco with his possessed dragon-fancier wand will be able to *use* it? I mean, maybe it can do things other than, er, turn small children to soul-sucking demons... presumably..."

Hermione forestalled the *Draco Malfoy, dark wizard at large* bit with her swift, authoritative knowhow. "We have one of the other mirrors already, there's *three*. Draco's connection to Dantanian, that might give him some special *in,* but really, there's no telling whether they might not be useful to *Harry*." Draco nodded, glad to get that spotlight off himself. "Gathering all three, or even just two, could synthesize a powerful weapon, for good or evil, beyond what we saw one mirror do in the memories. Maybe even without the last mirror, or any of the matching Hallows. To me, the most mysterious and the most fascinating is this Mirror of *Ecidyrue*-"

Alright, maybe it *wasn't* the best idea to let Hermione dominate the floor.

Sharp as a tack, that girl. Merlin would I miss her, if I chose... though I don't know if really you end up able to miss *anything- alright, Hamlet, save the existential crisis for the shower...*

Ron was gracious enough to interrupt, albeit with more unflattering assumptions. "Cor, this is just all because Frankenstein wants to become Master of Death, isn't it?"

"Oh, come on, if I was going for that, don't you think I would have kept the dark lord in training look intact?" Draco demonstratively fluffed his restored hair in its shorter, blonder glory. He was gratified to see Harry's eyes tracking it the closest, as they indeed had in periodic, furtive bursts since he arrived. Ginny had done a good enough job making him look like before, it seemed, for the boyfriend of before to take note.

"Though if it turned out that way… would that really be so bad?" Draco wheedled. "Not the worst thing, to have the Grim Reaper be your mate at pick-up footie on Saturdays."

"This is a job we have to do. A loose end we *cannot* leave unfinished, now that Draco's gone there himself and spoken to Grindelwald." Hermione gave Draco her obligatory death stare at that. "Like it or not, we're in it."

"Especially," Draco had to admit, "Because I might have told that old blowhard more than I should have. More than any of us would want the enemy hearing from that fucking silver tongue."

"It's alright, Draco, he knew about Dantanian already," Luna chimed in. "That's too much to let Voldemort know from the start. I don't want you being the biggest target because of your wand."

Assuming I'm not already. There they three were, Draco and Harry and Luna, Frankenstein and prime admirers- unfortunately both prime *platonic* admirers at the moment- in Voldemort's top must-kill list. Like *fuck, marry, kill*, except it was all kill.

Well, *hopefully.*

Neville went back to his old theme, *snitches get stitches* be damned. "We really can't tell *any* of the Order? The things we've learned from Grindelwald, even just the existence of these mirrors- could we let the Order know without letting them know the source was Grindelwald?"

I gave you back those parents of yours, Draco thought ungraciously, *And you just have to go and get so attached to them it makes you less useful, huh?*

Hermione didn't seem to buy in. "Oh, yes, and we'd have to hold back about Karkaroff and Periander too, that's the chain back from it."

"And the duel with Karkaroff," Luna said cheerfully. "There's the blood magic with Periander in fourth year that killed Lamia, then the other blood magic with the corpse." Ginny's eyes went wide, but no one was forthcoming with an explanation. "And all of us abetting a fugitive Karkaroff in the old vampire lair and deceiving Professor Snape. That wouldn't end well for Professor Lockhart."

Ron got into the spirit of things, piling on. "There's Draco stealing the bloody Mirror of Erised straight out from under Dumbledore's nose."

"You don't have to sound quite so pleased about that part," Hermione sniped. "As I recall, you were too occupied hurling on my shoes at the time to contribute."

"Oh, and there's the blackmailing the Pensieve memories from Professor Snape," Luna sing-songed merrily. "And what that letter proves about the headmaster, and no, Draco won't tell me that part either... but anyway, Professor Snape, as far as we know, still hasn't even told the headmaster of any of this. And really, you should talk to him, Draco..."

"To say they have grounds to expel me is a pretty quaint understatement. Azkaban would almost seem too merciful, you would think, for the likes of me."

Neville was somehow undaunted. "If we just tell my parents, maybe they'd keep it to themselves-"

"They'd tell Sirius and Remus," Harry of all people was the one to throw up as an objection. "Alice could never not tell Remus for very long. Do we trust Sirius and Remus not to go to Dumbledore?"

"You kidding, mate?" Ron snorted. "They're far too loyal to him. Dumbledore snaps his fingers and they spend a year outfitting Sirius's own ancestral castle for *Dumbledore's* use."

"You really don't think an adult-"

"Neville, we have an adult involved already," Draco interrupted, and received a room full of stares. "Professor Lockhart?" he tried, and then it was a room full of *laughter* that awaited him.

After a collective bout of hysteria that made Draco defensive of Gilderoy, Luna wanted to be sure then that Gilderoy wouldn't tell Severus. Draco rather stiffly assured her he would never

do any such thing. It prompted one of Ginny's many *I'm so out of the loop* looks, at the thought *that* would be a point where the line of information could be compromised.

"And my godfather," Draco said, a bad taste in his mouth, "Is obviously too loyal to Dumbledore to trust he wouldn't tell him. And- he's held back information from *me* before."

"We could," Harry said, like Draco had been hoping and praying he wouldn't, "Just *tell* Headmaster Dumbledore. Aren't we supposed to be 'Dumbledore's Army'?" To which Draco wanted to retort that the Grindelwald situation was too personal to Dumbledore for the man to be objective, but he held his tongue.

"Or," Luna threw out, because if they were just throwing out their favorite adults' names, she had one, "We could ask my father for advice. I don't think he'd talk about it to anyone. Except the mirrors are so interesting, he might want to publish an article about them in the Quibbler."

"Dumbledore-"

"Hates me," Draco cut Harry off, and enjoyed the miffed look Harry got then. *Don't you wish you could just come take it out on me after, baby?* he thought towards Harry with his eyes, and Harry just simmered more at him in return. "I did try to blackmail him."

"I still can't believe that part." Ginny looked like it made her fonder of Draco, even as the reminder soured Harry's face more. "Oh, won't you tell us what information-"

"A story for another time. I promise I will tell, then," Draco said airily. "So that leaves us to figure this out between ourselves. The seven of us, right here, right now. Gilderoy owes me so much, he'll follow whatever path I choose for us, so let's choose it." *As Dumbledore's Army against Dumbledore.*

Hermione cut through all any feeble objections. "It comes down to three choices. Option one. Get the mirror somehow earlier than September. Option two. Find some way to prevent any chance of Voldemort *wanting* to get to Grindelwald in Nurmengard, or at least of succeeding at it. And option three... well, option three isn't on the table."

What was on the table was Apparition lessons, which Hermione somehow had convinced herself Draco needed to make a token appearance at, despite him having Apparated perfectly competently since, as far as she knew, third year. Hermione insisted it was the appearance of the thing, although Ron was of the opinion illegal Apparition was hardly on top of the list, when it came to negative suspicions one could harbor about Draco Black.

Ron was full of opinions on the matter, as it turned out. After a notice went up in the common rooms, Ron was suddenly more anxious about the Apparition test than both dark lords put together- Draco supposed he should say all *three*, according to Grindelwald, although much to his displeasure it now seemed likely for Grindelwald to survive the other two. And Draco promised to give Ron some pointers, although he was privately of the opinion that Ron might just be better off letting Hermione take him places. Apparently, he hadn't managed any Apparition yet, not even once.

"Harry has," Ron said gloomily, "Though he acts like we're in the same loser's boat," and when Harry tried to protest, Ron chucked Draco's Potions textbook at him. Which had once been Severus's, but Draco didn't have the heart to put a stop to any of this sophomoric everydayness. Even when it earned their corner of the Ravenclaw common room dark looks from Padma Patil. Those might just be for Ron's existence anyway.

"Harry can't participate," Hermione reminded Ron. "He won't be seventeen in time."

"You'd think they'd make an exception," Luna said cheerfully. "With the darkest wizard in history on your tail, Harry, you think they'd be willing to fudge a few dates to give you the right to Apparate away from him."

"Maybe Draco can give you some pointers too," Ron offered, "On the sly." Draco gave him a mock-offended look, to mask how good it felt to be caught back up in the swing of pretending to be a sixth-year. Only sixth-years were in their common room, up late studying and fretting over Apparition, with Harry himself opening the textbook and poring over its pages.

"Is this your way of building up to asking for illegal Apparition lessons?" Draco teased, lowering his voice. "Striker wouldn't need it, she's already done it twice, but there's the blunderbusses to think of. You planning to sweeten the pot with Harry?" Harry did look up sharply at that. "Not that there's anything to sweeten the pot with," he added, hastily raising his hands, and that didn't seem to please Harry either.

"Oh, wouldn't it be nice if they just got back together already?" Luna complained shamelessly to Neville, loud enough that Padma and Tony could likely hear from across the room. "If this is what we were like when we were broken up, Neville, I'm astonished no one took drastic measures."

"I did," Neville said with embarrassed pride, and was rewarded with an open-mouthed enough kiss to elicit gagging noises from Ron, and a supercilious look from Hermione.

"That's the thing about having mates," Ron sighed. "Insufferable when they're dating," he jerked his thumb towards Luna and Neville, "And insufferable when they aren't." He jerked his thumb the other way towards the more morose Harry and Draco. "Remind me why we bother with this lot? Right, Apparition lessons from Frankenstein… no, I don't think even that could help."

He peered over Harry's shoulder. "Anything in there about Apparition? That's Draco's text from his godfather, right, the one with all the secret recipes and spells? Reckon Professor Snape could Apparate before he could walk." Harry was staring instead at a place that made Draco's throat constrict. "'Sectumsempra'," Ron read over his shoulder. "'For enemies.' You think Slughorn's an enemy?"

"He is," Harry said resentfully, "If he keeps stonewalling me about-" He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Tom Riddle. Sorry, Draco, I know you don't like hearing about my work for Dumbledore, but it's driving me crazy, I just can't get it out of him..."

"Sectumsempra," Hermione said quietly, "Would hardly be the way to get anything out of anyone." She put down her dry quill on her finished Defense essay, with the feathers pointing incidentally towards the name *Professor Snape* like some oblique accusation.

"Oh, right, that's the spell that killed-" Neville began, but broke off instantly at the look on Draco's face.

"None of you," Draco said tightly, "Are to use that spell. Ever."

Especially once- if- I'm gone.

But I don't want *to be gone. There's no telling what idiocies this lot will get up to without me-*

"No Sectumsempra," Draco insisted, and Luna blinked at him dewily.

"Oh, but I've already spent such time practicing it," she said, unrepentant.

"Did your godfather invent it?" Harry asked, eyes narrowing like he was trying to figure something out. Draco had no idea. Nothing incriminating there he didn't know about him already.

Maybe the memory could have assaulted Draco then, of Harry using that spell that seemed to so attract him on Draco himself, in a different lifetime. But that was- well, from a different lifetime. Draco's frustrations with Harry were of a far pettier and more personal nature, and his real disquiet was elsewhere. Towards the once-owner of that Potions text.

Draco rose to his feet. "Speaking of my godfather," he said with a forced smile, "I think you've been right, Hermione, that I should talk to him. Bury the hatchet and all. It's bury the hatchet or bury the hatcheted, right?"

A traumatized silence greeted Draco.

"I don't think anyone says that," offered Neville, and Draco left them to their burdens and puzzles, Harry to Slughorn, Ron to Apparition, Hermione to her usual academic hysteria, and Luna and Neville to each other. He only flinched as he heard their conversation turn back to Apparition in his imminent absence. Hermione asked if anyone else besides Draco had missed every single Apparition lesson.

Harry's voice followed Draco out of Ravenclaw Tower. "No one in our year but Theodore Nott."

Descending to the dungeons with that name in mind was hardly a pleasant affair, with the magic against him it conjured up in his own head. Every floor he went down felt instead like the dungeon had climbed up that amount closer to him, looming in upon him, with some invisible miasma pooling at its corners and depths that awaited him. *I won't see Theo, just Severus,* Draco told himself. He was right, though the presence of something that hated him was palpable, like a Black Letter with the dagger already out of the envelope, poised waiting.

He had to shake the ridiculous feeling he was being watched, as his feet made their way by muscle memory towards Severus's chambers. Harry often looked at the Marauder's Map, enough to know if Theo or indeed any other Slytherin or ally had been following Draco around- enough to indeed see whether there was suspicious movement from them *anywhere*. Draco knew Harry watched it for that per his dark intimations, and even in April there were no signs of the sort. Certainly, there were no congregations near the Room of Requirement, and no dark presence to dog Draco's steps as he approached his godfather's chambers. Perhaps there were eyes of some dark spectral being on him, just as he imagined, but the creature was his guilt.

When Severus opened the door, Draco was hit by a doubled feeling of unwelcomeness. That sallow face and sunken dark eyes looked as fearful as Draco's, for his godson to be down here where he had once so confidently called home.

"Draco?" he said softly, then looked around rapidly for onlookers or eavesdroppers. "Muffliato. What are you doing here? Has something happened?"

"I thought," Draco said, casting about for an excuse, "That we were meant to have check-ins each week, right? That didn't formally stop, just because-" *You betrayed me* were the careless words that came to mind, but he didn't finish the sentence.

"If you have something to impart," Severus hissed, practically sub-vocalizing despite the covering spell, "One might have thought the session at Xaphan would have sufficed. Draco, I did not expect you, or I would have told you not to come." Draco couldn't hold back his childish consternation from his face, and Severus did smile at that, a thin sort of rueful one. "Ah, how typical. Vain boy. You would have resented the invitation from a man you now despise, but you also resent a *lack* of invitation."

"Is something wrong?" Draco whispered. That was his first instinct from Severus's demeanor: *Something's changed with Voldemort. Something's gotten worse*. Draco had made a mistake, he was realizing, cutting Severus out of his life the way he had, putting this difficult distance between them, almost as much of a mistake as he had done wasting a month in bed trying to talk to Dantanian. But how could he have known there would be so little time left?

"You must not be seen here. It is not safe for you, and it is not safe for me."

"Near your chambers, or in the dungeons?"

"Yes," Severus hissed with a baring of his teeth. Incongruously enough, from up close they looked whiter and straighter than Draco ever recalled seeing, like Severus had taken some unusual pains with his appearance over break. Draco tried not to connect that in his mind with Gilderoy.

There were far darker things that could have unfolded against Severus Snape over Easter than an increase in interest in dental hygiene. "Did Voldemort-" Severus's look made him drop his voice to the utmost quietness as well, so much that he had to repeat himself more than once. Draco was starting to think he should have used a Disillusionment charm to come here, along with the Muffliato Severus had put on them and yet somehow was paranoid enough not even to trust. "Did something happen with the Dark Lord that no one's telling me?"

"Nothing as intriguing, one is sure," Severus intoned, as contemptuously as he could manage while whispering, "As your jaunt off to professional Quidditch matches. Do not concern yourself with those affairs. Although I suppose you are no longer any sort of willing recipient of my orders."

Draco wanted to tell Severus he was forgiven, that he had no animosity left for his decision to hide the memories, but he couldn't find the words. Forgiveness was not absolution, and the world had no absolution for Draco or Severus, in the zero-sum game their respective existences had become with one another.

"Your presence is truly perilous..."

"But there's Apparition. I've just seen the notice posted of the exam. I should take it, shouldn't I? I'll need my head of house to register me for that licensing, I *have* been remiss in the practicalities of being a Hogwarts sixth-year-"

"The Hogwarts sixth-year in question," Severus said smoothly, "Has another Head of House. And the distance he has placed between himself and his former head of house may only be judged as prudent, in the present moment."

Draco's mouth snapped closed. He didn't understand how he could have forgotten. "Sorry," Draco whispered, "Sorry," and turned to go, even as he heard Severus make a noise to forestall him.

"It is I," Severus said, quiet as the grave, "Who should be the one to apologize, without excuse," and Draco turned to regard that pale bleak beloved face without even a fragment of understanding between them.

"Remember, Severus, you're not supposed to apologize for things, to me," Draco said weakly. "You're supposed to be a cool godfather. So..." He tried to remember what he would always used to say. "Be cool."

"Take care," Severus whispered to his departing back. "Draco Black."

Draco left to go right up to the Room of Requirement, unaccountably agitated. There was something he had to do that he could not even trust to his own safekeeping, nor his invisible ink after the Langlock had failed against Grindelwald. He got the usual small room, which had used to be the place where Harry would await him. His insides sickened at the sight of the blue chair, as if some blazoned sapphire reminder of everything he had lost and would lose.

"Colovaria," Draco hissed, and the chair turned emerald green. When Draco climbed onto the green, he felt an uneasy magic in it. He took out a parchment and quill, the firelight sufficient for relatively few words, and wrote words he knew that before he left this room he would have to burn.

Draco Black	Severus Snape
Danger of the talon wand in other hands	Danger of the talon wand in Draco Black's hands
Heir to House Black	Hecate's curse
Younger (physically more so)	More intelligent
Draco saved lives	Severus saved lives
Draco helped prove Sirius's innocence	Severus saved his worst enemy's life, for Draco's sake
Draco restored Frank and Alice Longbottom	Severus saved the wizarding world
Draco saved Gilderoy from Azkaban	Severus had to do everything alone
	Severus was always alone
Severus was a Death Eater	Draco was a Death Eater
Severus was cruel to Harry	Draco was not a spy for Dumbledore
	Draco murdered four people
	Draco used people
	Draco is always a liar

Draco ruined Theodore Nott's life

Harry Potter, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black,

Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, Gilderoy Lockhart

Ronald Weasley, Neville Longbottom

Draco might have better spent his time working on something practical. When he did not have his Dementor essay in Defense, his own godfather did not hesitate to give him detention for it. Detention, it later turned out, to secretly be spent on extra hours assisting the unloading of supplies, at the built portions of Xaphan. But detention was detention.

He almost wanted to rise to his feet, bitter at Severus sending him away the past night and bitter for more than that. Everything for Draco's safety, right? Even *willing* to be friends again, Severus still had him at arm's length, 'safe' and drowning in irony.

He could call out something like, *Really? Because I could just give a verbal presentation instead. How would you like it if I told the class* everything *I know about Dementors?*

He held his tongue. It was one thing to contemplate his death in a year, and another thing to actively seek it, today.

Still. He could have done without the gleeful spree of laughter it sent through the class's Slytherins.

"Now open your book at page two hundred and thirteen, Mr. Black," Severus said, face blank as he spoke the name, "And read the first two paragraphs on the Cruciatus curse..."

On the weekend that followed, Ron, Hermione, and Neville went off to Apparition lessons, which Harry clearly wished he could attend. Draco had detention, so was not in a place to offer any illegal lessons. Nor did Harry seem overly fond of the offer, from the only other of their group to remain in the hall with him: Luna proposing Harry and her practice illegal Apparition together, from Hagrid's hut. "It will be just like we're fleeing for our lives," Luna said excitedly.

That offer was somehow rebuffed.

"I have to get you-know-what," Harry hissed to Luna, "From you-know-who." Draco knew he meant the memory from Slughorn for Dumbledore, but Luna was left blinking, and then hurrying after her departing cousin for an explanation.

"You would have noticed if you were in our Potions class," Draco explained as she trotted after him. "He's been staying behind to waylay Slughorn every day about it, but that old

bugger's a slippery one. Merlin, by now half the class must think Harry's ditched me because he fancies *Slughorn*."

"No, don't worry," Luna said helpfully. "Everyone thinks Harry ditched you because of your personality."

Harry had little luck in his Slughorn project after, but with Draco's help alongside Frank, Alice, Sirius, and Remus, the citadel was coming together more nicely. What an indignity, to give so much aid to the one of Dumbledore's projects that was actually working.

Beyond the citadel, what Draco found that sunny seaside day of impending summer left things worse.

Draco had been sent to fetch Gilderoy after an afternoon of heavy magical lifting and heavier avoidance of Sirius and Remus. There was some minor consultation needed, as to the exact shape of the domed ceiling they were constructing for the official entryway. Behind the drawbridge, the stone and stained glass would rise, red and gold highest set to come aflame at certain slants of light. But that needed the citadel's architect or at least construction director par excellence, none other than Gilderoy Lockhart, holder of the plans for Xaphan in both his tower and his head. At the very least, Gilderoy would have to come up and show the plans' location in said library tower to the others. They had done a perfunctory search, and found nothing but ointments from Severus, which had cost Draco pains to explain away.

But Gilderoy was down patching up the walls, on the outside close enough to the sea for high tide to threaten boot leather. Severus had risked the threat, despite not having any role in this menial task, and despite it being already finished from what Draco could see, no reason for anyone to be held up except outside curiosities. With Severus and Gilderoy's backs leaned against a wall so well-repaired it bore no marks of decay, throwing them both entirely into shadow, that curiosity found voice. It was a question Draco had asked himself, and *the* question Gilderoy would surely be asked the most, should he ever find legal absolution and be unleashed back out onto the world.

Severus Snape turned out to be the only one to have the courage to ask it.

"Why did you do it?"

"Seguinus?" Gilderoy said blankly. Severus had to specify, a pained look crossing his face. Draco opened his mouth to announce his presence, only to close it once Severus asked,

"Why did you choose to become an imposter?"

"Ah, you mean my literary sojourns as Gilderoy Lockhart, monster-hunter extraordinaire?" Gilderoy laughed.

Severus was never likely to be moved by such frittering. "Your adventures," Severus drawled, "As Obliviator of the wizarding world's best and brightest *monster-hunters extraordinaire*, as you put it. What launched you upon this singularly foolhardy and unworthy venture? Even had you not made the stupefyingly imbecilic choice to become a Defense professor and beg to be found out, you would have been uncovered surely before long regardless, and without

my godson to intercede for you then. You are not suited by character, Gilderoy, to that height of deception."

"I suppose I should be honored," Gilderoy laughed nervously, "For a man as blunt as you to characterize me as honest."

"Only," Severus corrected mildly, "Unwittingly so. You try to conceal, but against your own judgment, you reveal all your treasures. So answer the question, Gilderoy. Why?"

Gilderoy fidgeted, drawing his legs up closer to himself. His chin rested on his knees, golden fall of hair over Ravenclaw-blue fur a distracting sight which failed to distract. "Are you bringing this up to- I don't know, embarrass me? There's no need, I've been shamed every way there is for a man to be shamed. I didn't go and hunt the monsters myself because I didn't have the talent or the will for it. But I did have a natural talent at memory charms, so that was my route instead."

"That is *how*," Severus scowled, with a voice like in class scolding a Weasley, "Not *why.* Had you no fear you would be unmasked?"

"No," Gilderoy said, tossing his head with a hint of his old arrogance crossing his face. "I had faith in my charms, and I had faith that even if somehow one *did* get undone, the person would come to speak to me before the public. And then, well..."

"You worked your way in with these individuals," Severus intoned, "In the main, by charm, one extrapolates? If necessary, by..." Severus's lip curled distastefully, as he pronounced the word like some foreign virus. "Sensuality?"

Gilderoy's shoulders slumped, pretense of pride deserting him. "I am aware of the irony of my eventual fate, given the methods I frequently utilized. I am well aware indeed. Perhaps it was the only fitting punishment for-"

"It was not," Severus interrupted coldly, "Fitting. None deserve that punishment, whatever their crimes. True punishment cannot be given by another crime, only by legal justice. And that is what met you in absentia, Gilderoy. Attribute not the rest to some cosmic karmic nonsense. You *suffered*, as so many suffer, due to a simple set of twin forces: ill will and poor luck."

"My luck had to run out sometime," Gilderoy tried to laugh. Severus leaned in, fixing him under those piercing dark eyes of his like a microscope, intent upon the squirming perpetrator as Draco had hardly seen him be on anything. "I don't know what to say. We- we were at school together, though I was enough years behind I suppose you never noticed me. I wasn't the most noticeable, in truth." Severus waited, as if this sentimental bit was white noise. "I wanted to be, though. I wanted everyone to notice me. I always fancied I would grow up to be special, and yet I found myself mediocre, the most mediocre soul Ravenclaw had seen in many years. Nor did anyone hesitate to remind me of that fact."

Dare one think that *sympathy* on Severus's eternally harsh face? Perhaps just understanding. As if that was such an easy thing itself, to come by from Severus Snape.

"I was ambitious, but I couldn't see any way to accomplish my ambitions except- the underhanded way. Many better men than I in that position have made my choice."

Severus looked frustrated to find Gilderoy so well-prepared with words, where perhaps he had hoped to break him down and dissect him for some deeper truth. "But you have the ability to learn a discipline and excel in it. You have shown that not just with memory charms, but with castle-building. Yes, under unimaginable duress, but you must not truly be the *worst* Ravenclaw in decades. Not centuries, at least. If nothing else, there *was* Dantanian Noir." Severus looked unwittingly pleased to draw a shaky laugh, for what he hadn't meant to be a bon mot. "You would have had means to support yourself, if not reach the levels of wealth and fame you-"

"I thought I deserved it!" Gilderoy turned his face away from Severus. "You wish the truth? Fine! I felt I deserved to be famous and adored and rich, that I had always been meant to be seen as a hero, and that in my own way- I was! I really did think myself a hero! Laugh all you like at my self-deception."

Severus did not laugh, did not move, just waited.

"I would tell myself," Gilderoy finally admitted, "That it was like a game of stakes, between myself and my victims. Stakes they were unaware of, yes, but they were in the game regardless, they'd put themselves there by being exceptional. I told myself that with these great men and women, these real heroes- if I could deceive them, if I could get the jump on them and successfully Obliviate them, then I was just as good as them. Better! I might as well *have* done what they'd done, if I could conquer *them*. I don't know why I let myself believe that, that stabbing a dragonslayer in the back meant you had slain a dragon, but... I did. I was *not* ashamed. As it happens, I was very proud of myself. I thought myself the cleverest man alive. Now will you cease toying around with grave dirt and leave me to my prison walls?"

Gilderoy's voice had risen to a serious volume before he realized, and he hastily shut his mouth when he did. "I'm sorry," he said, cornflower-blue eyes wide and wild. He wrapped his fur coat around himself protectively, hugging his knees as if expecting any variety of punishment, and comforting himself before the inevitable was the only right response to that eventuality.

"Sorry to have done what you did," Severus said, unreadable, "Or merely sorry to have raised your voice, at a man whose good will you find convenient for the healing of your scars?"

"Both." Gilderoy sounded to be fighting tears. He was not hard to shatter these days, Gilderoy, although perhaps he had never been. "I did come to regret it, all of it, at L'Infern. Because it made me realize how hard it really was, to- to actually face a monster. To fight one. Even to- to escape- to get away from one- I realized I'd stolen their deeds, written books about them, and only when it was too late did I *understand* them. Because backstabbing wasn't brave like I thought it was. I had never known real fear, until-" He snuck a glance at Severus, the kind that seemed not so much to be judging whether he would be hurt, as how badly he would be. "Until I met someone really to be afraid of. So I'm sorry. I am sorry. I swear I'm sorry."

"Enough," Severus said abruptly. "No more apologies. They..." In that strange moment, the spying Draco could see Severus likely remembering Draco's words, though they came out differently. "They do not suit you. I prefer you smiling."

Gilderoy tried weakly to smile. "I am quite a bother, aren't I? I know myself a burden, but I am trying- you don't know how I'm trying, Severus-"

"I know," Severus said, and took Gilderoy's hand. Gilderoy stared at him hard, then leaned forward and gave a kiss to Severus's hand, leaving Severus looking thunderstruck. "Gilderoy?" he said, frowning. Gilderoy's crumpled frame leaned against Severus's, seeking it out as if for reassurance or just further warmth. The sound of the ocean made the motion more natural, as if Gilderoy could not help but be drawn in like the tide towards the shore, like a moon to its orbit. As if Severus did truly mean comfort now, for one other person in the world besides Draco, instead of always just eternal uneasy threat.

"Thank you," Gilderoy said, "Thank you for listening to me," and Severus shook his head wryly, staring down at his own hand as if the imprint of Gilderoy's lips there had left a mark.

"You are," Severus observed detachedly, "A different man to the one I knew at Hogwarts. One can hardly believe you the same person. And yet here you are. The only real thing left unchanged those-" The corner of Severus's lip turned up. "Eyes of such *excessive* blue."

"Um, sorry?" Gilderoy said weakly, and dropped his face to his and Severus's linked hands. Severus's other hand lifted and drew close, looking almost like he meant to stroke Gilderoy's hair. Then it dropped away. When Gilderoy's face nuzzled down against the back of Severus's hand, though, Severus didn't stop him, just let out a soft sigh.

"Thank you," Gilderoy said again, then leaned over and pressed his hands to Severus's face. When Severus didn't pull back, just stared at Gilderoy's mouth, Gilderoy impulsively pressed his lips to Severus's.

It was hard to tell what either man felt in the kiss or drew from it. They made a picture of absolute contrast, Severus dark and Gilderoy as golden as his name in the beach light, Severus dressed plainly and austerely but perfectly clean, with Gilderoy fluffed up like a peacock in his unseasonable fur coat but strewn with dirt and sand and dust. Severus motionless, lips half-parted against Gilderoy's, while Gilderoy was leaning into the other man with the force of his body, lips together a soft wet sound under the roar of the waves. The only sure thing was that Severus did not pull away, or shove Gilderoy away from him, as anyone who knew an iota about the man would have expected. Gilderoy was the one to finally pull away, closed eyes flickering back open. They met Severus's half-closed stare and they regarded one another with a gaze at once like they were lovers and like they had never before met.

"Gilderoy, what are you…" Severus said, voice coming out embarrassingly husky. It must have been the first time he had been kissed in any number of years.

Gilderoy jerked back in shock at what he had done, the spell broken. "I'm sorry! I don't know what I was thinking, I'm sorry!" he yelped. His fingers went to his mouth, as if unable to

believe the lips under his fingertips had reached and touched such a venerated place. "I didn't mean to, I was just- ah- um-"

"Grateful for my acceptance? Your standard payment for kindness?" Severus said wryly, and then more forebodingly, "Or perhaps you mistook me for someone else."

Gilderoy shook his head fearfully, struck mute.

Draco could no longer in good conscience keep spying. In genuinely good faith, he would have announced his presence minutes ago. Now he had seen something he never should have known. The least he could do was rescue Gilderoy now. He walked into the filming of high tide before them on the beach, feet breaking the over-bright reflections of light on white water.

"Severus? Gilderoy? There you are," Draco interrupted, as if he had just arrived, and his deception was a success. Neither distracted man seemed to suspect a thing.

Draco only had to face Gilderoy over something more serious once Severus was gone, and that was thankfully not related to Draco's godfather. It was, perhaps, just as dangerous, but at least it would not cut at Gilderoy's pride. Only at Draco's, to have to ask such a thing of anyone, and reveal the depths of desperation he had found in himself, with the capacity that depths in turn unfolded in him.

"Gilderoy," Draco asked, catching his arm before they could follow Severus back towards the castle. "One second. I wanted to talk to you about…" He lowered his voice. "The night you escaped L'Infern. How you did it. How you broke past the wards. Because as I see it, the wards are the greatest issue with that, aren't they, if they're calibrated to keep someone in. That's what your captor had, which is why you were left at such liberty *inside* the walls, right?"

Gilderoy seemed too distracted to even think what his benefactor might want with that information. "I- I can write you an account of it, if you like. Or when we're at more leisure, you can interview me. As you said, right now, I'm expected for the matter of the dome at the entrance-"

"I'll interview you later, then. As soon as possible," Draco said, and began the walk back with him, calculated so that they were out of hearing range from Severus, though they were silent, preoccupied with their own thoughts. As no doubt was Severus, as the dark straight back that Gilderoy watched so ponderously was as stiff as Draco had ever seen it. Only once they were outside the entrance hall, Severus gone inside to squabble over what sounded to be absolutely nothing with Sirius, did Gilderoy come back to reality enough to question Draco's request.

"An, er, an interview? I'm flattered, Draco, but…" Gilderoy looked around nervously, as if worried Draco was really ready to rip into him as soon as possible for the affront of laying lips upon his godfather. But Draco had a simpler purpose.

Hermione was right. They were getting no closer to any solution. At some point, they had to admit there was a third option.

"Tomorrow," Draco said, and when Gilderoy looked too anxious to function, took pity on him. "I'll talk to you about it tomorrow. Just to think. To brainstorm ideas." They were too close to the others to say any names, so Draco just lowered his voice to the smallest it could go, and repeated three times in Gilderoy's ear for him to understand:

"There's a man I'd like to break out of a castle."

Coming of Age

Chapter Notes

> Hey all! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments, I definitely read them all and they mean a lot to me! <3 Hope you all are doing well and have a good weekend! :)

Playlist

"Aigua infernal," said Seguinus Sade. "You have heard talk of hellfire, no doubt. And this is hell's water."

Draco had expected the most monstrous creature out of the pits of hell, worse than Grindelwald, worse than Voldemort, worse even than Draco's father. But the man in the Pensieve was not frightening. Perhaps because he was like a more confident, put together, self-possessed version of Severus, with long dark hair and pale skin and eyes darker than obsidian daggers. And there was his deep soothing voice, not a schoolteacher's but a sovereign serene in his unquestioned domain, educating his guest Gilderoy without the hint of a need for violence ever crossing its shadow.

They stood on the shore of a glacier lake that proved the more foreboding sight, with the chill of impending autumn sending shivers over the water's surface already from such a bracing altitude. *Are we still in Spain?* Gilderoy had asked breathlessly. Their winding trek to the predictably-named Estany de L'Infern took them higher than he professed he had ever been, here at Seguinus's charming mountain chateau. *Are we still in Spain,* Gilderoy asked, awe-struck by the moonlit view, *Or are we in France?*

Seguinus stooped down and ran his hand through the water, a shiver of wind coming from high above to vibrate the clear surface over the pebbles, as he touched ever-bitter cold. "What did I call this water to you? El agua? L'eau?" Gilderoy did not look likely to produce a worthy answer to the question, but then, it had been a rhetorical flourish. "No, it is aigua here. So we are not in either France or Spain. We are in Catalunya."

"Oh, so Spain," said Gilderoy.

From the look Seguinus leveled at him then, it was a miracle the arch-vampire hadn't drained him dry that instant, sending the shore of the lake momentarily red with it. Let alone keeping him alive with him for years, against his will at times.

"No. Catalunya is Catalunya. But let me tell you of more interesting things. Can you hazard a guess why this is called the water of hell?"

"No, let's see," said Gilderoy, bending down to touch it. Seguinus caught Gilderoy's wrist in a grip so tight, Gilderoy cried out in surprised pain. When Seguinus obligingly let go of Gilderoy's more delicate wrist, taking just a split second longer than he had to, there were thick finger marks drawn perpendicular over the veins of his wrist.

"I did not set out to hurt you, but to stop you," Seguinus said by way of apology. It might have been true. "You are so careless. Touch your wrist and grimace as you might, Gilt, if you understood you would thank me for stopping you from contact with this lake."

"But you just splashed at it," Gilderoy said naively.

"Yes," Seguinus said patiently, "And I am different from you in what singular capacity?"

"You're not as famous," Gilderoy tried, and Seguinus didn't bother to feign a smile at Gilderoy's inanity. "And you're not *quite* as devastatingly good-looking."

"Oh, not quite," Seguinus purred, and stroked a rough palm- the dry one- down Gilderoy's cheek, before letting Gilderoy's face go dismissively aside. There looked to be real appreciation there, with any darkness behind an envelope of barely maintained civility. Far smarter people than Gilderoy had been must have easily fallen for this man's looks and presence. The aura was palpable, even in a memory, of a fascinating control.

"And you're a vampire," Gilderoy said breathlessly, sounding as if he found this fact much more stimulating than he soon would.

"A vampire whose years have taught him there are places where humans must tread lightly," Seguinus said with benign enjoyment, "Or be tread upon. My home is such a place. And it is not the Castell and its faded glory but the Estany de L'Infern at the center of its malignity. Have you questioned yourself *why* this castle is called the castle of hell?"

Gilderoy blinked dewily. "Because the mountain is called Pic de L'Infern," he said earnestly, in full confidence.

Seguinus was admirably patient. "Yes, and why is the *mountain* called that?"

Gilderoy tilted his head. "Because it's very tall and has a steep slant," he mused, "Making its ascent uniquely difficult? And there's that smaller peak, on the end of the long, flatter descent to the other side, which you said makes it look like there's the body of a great snake buried beneath, or a dragon-"

"Not a bad answer," Seguinus coached him on, the world's kindest Socratic dialogue between monster and future victim. "But a Muggle one, Gilt. Not a magical one. Did you know that Dante Alighieri was a wizard, and knew of this place when he wrote his Commedia Divina?"

"Dante?"

Seguinus explained about the poem's narrative, which he characterized as a living man taken down into hell, then shown purgatory and heaven in turn, "the drowned and the saved", in order to teach him about sin and salvation and save him from his own future damnation.

Gilderoy was compelled, as Seguinus clearly cued him to be, by Dante's notion of hell, the name and spiritual reference themselves taken from Muggle religion, but organized by the more wizarding principle of *circles.*

That led to a slight digression, as Gilderoy just had to know what the other places were made of, and the answer of *terraces* and then *spheres* proved costly for Seguinus, as Gilderoy did not know nor could apparently conceive of what a *terrace* is. "We are standing on one right now," Seguinus prompted, but to little avail. Eventually, Gilderoy was coaxed to abandon this grand perplexing question of the terrace for the greater good.

"Seven circles," Seguinus eventually concluded, "Spiraling further and further downwards, each holding a different category of sinners to suffer in a contrapasso, a punishment that exactly fit the crime. The deeper the circle, the worse the sin. And the deepest circle was not full of hellfire. What do you imagine could be found there instead, for the worst of all imaginable punishments?"

Gilderoy had the grace to catch on here. "Not hellfire, but- hell water?"

"Exactly," Seguinus said, "Aigua infernal." He once again lifted a handful and let it trickle down, where it shone like unhinged stars in the moonlight.

"And what is it about this water that makes it so terrible a punishment?"

"It's water, to be sure, but Dante visited in the winter months. You can find the Estany de L'Infern at the bottom of his hell, but the glacier lake is frozen. Immobility, cold, the constant immersion of drowning and freezing to death at once, for eternity. That in itself would be a formidable punishment. But hell is *relinquishment*. Of control, and of what one values. What is the most valuable thing a wizard possesses?"

"His magic?"

"Exactly," Seguinus hissed, the dark glimmer in his lovely eyes more sinister for a moment. Not long enough, though, for the eye not to question whether it had seen it at all, on the face of such a sweet and kind man. "Immersion in aigua infernal robs a human wizard of his magic, once and for all. There is no reversal, no appeal, no authority or power in the world to restore what has been lost. Even Death. Even *time.* His magic dies in every time and every possible world. That is the peculiarity of this lake, and the reason that the castle was constructed here. That is why this is the castle of hell. Because- despite much testing, there has never been an answer known as to *what*- let alone *how* or *why*- *this* is the hole in the world where magic goes to die. Now give me a kiss, little one. Are you so aggrieved by some pretty marks on your wrist now?"

Gilderoy stepped up and kissed Seguinus eagerly, erotic fervor greater than any thirst for knowledge. Seguinus smirked against his mouth. He made Gilderoy draw back in alarm when he leaned his left hand behind himself, crouching and pulling Gilderoy with him, and drew his fingers once more over the water.

"You- you don't mean all that, it was just a story," Gilderoy said breathlessly. "You wouldn't be- having me so close, playing with it like this, otherwise-"

"Shall we test it?" said Seguinus, and flicked his fingers in Gilderoy's direction. Gilderoy yelped and tried to scamper away, but Seguinus held him fast to his side with his other hand. No doubt, he'd left more marks. The water touched only Seguinus, but Gilderoy was shaking from head to toe.

"Why- why would this be a place to build a castle, though? Such a horrible place- you said- experiments to find its origin, or-"

"Or perhaps," Seguinus said mildly, stroking Gilderoy's golden hair, "For humans, it proved an effective barrier. And threat."

"It was a lie, though," Gilderoy said anxiously, as soon as the memory had ended and Draco pulled his head out of the Pensieve. "I tried to avoid it- tried to dig under it- but I didn't get far enough, and in the end we had no choice but to risk it. And myself and all those little girls swam and struggled through half of that terrible lake and its cold, but once I was out of it, in time, my magic returned. I can't remember how long. Only that they wanted me to make a fire, and I could. So I told the Catalan ministry, but they don't *think* I've turned all the girls to Squibs- but even if it had, they agreed it was preferable to keeping them in place..."

"You said after, it came back," Draco surmised, "But *during,* it stopped your magic?"

"It did," Gilderoy said, hanging his head. "I tried to use it to help the girls swim, lift one of the tired ones, and I couldn't do a thing. I couldn't feel any magic in me when I tried to pull on it, either. While I still had that water on me, I was without magic. But permanent? It wasn't that."

"Do you think he was lying to keep you in line," Draco asked carefully, "Or that he simply didn't know how it really worked? I mean, maybe people who entered that water... didn't tend to come out."

"I think he knew," Gilderoy said, lips drawing together thinly and going white.

"And you think it was actually the water that *saved* you? That broke the personal tie to the wards that Seguinus had placed on you?"

"It was a tie on my magic. When my magic stopped, there was nothing left for it to hold onto. For it to have returned when my magic was reborn in me, I believe he would have had to tie that knot again. But no, I don't think he knew the water would have *that* effect, sundering the bond, or that I would ever *dare* go into the lake."

Gilderoy was staring at the surface of the Pensieve, as if into the clear limpidity of recollection housed there, so little and yet too hideously much. Draco had asked too much of him with this, but then, he always did with Gilderoy.

"So this is something specific to Castell de L'Infern," Draco concluded, "And not transferable to Nurmengard."

Far too much to have asked, if it was a mere interesting factoid.

"Do you know if the water would work if it was transplanted outside the lake, or outside Pic de L'Infern? If it could, and it had the magic-neutering effect..."

"He told me another time that it wouldn't. But... I did hear him and his people once speak of constructing another castle elsewhere if they were discovered and Catalunya became untenable for them. They spoke then of the prospect of another hell lake, or one all around the castle as a natural moat. But even they weren't aware how to do it. They thought Seguinus might know... but that knowledge is buried with him under the stones of L'Infern."

There went that idea. Draco tried desperately to change the subject, if to another fraught one. But surely not as painful as the subject of that memory, or at least Draco could only hope. "I still can't believe you got Severus to bring you a *Pensieve* to set up here." Draco looked at the great charcoal-colored basin then with the amazement it deserved, for its origin in the largesse of one Severus Snape.

Gilderoy looked displeased rather than gratified at the reminder. "He seemed," Gilderoy said quietly, "Grateful to do something for me, rather than spend any time with me, when he has to be here for Dumbledore's check-ins. A surprising fount of conversation topics, a Pensieve." Gilderoy laughed mirthlessly. "He thinks I want to store memories so I can write my *memoirs*."

"You'd think your rehabilitation would have involved going cold turkey on the literary front," Draco jibed, but Gilderoy didn't smile. Draco could see why Severus would find that absence so vexing, when it was usually so easy to bring one flashing across that solicitous face. "Why is he avoiding talking to you?"

It was cruel to ask when Draco had a good idea why, but he'd asked. Gilderoy was predictably evasive. "Ah, well, we've- to be frank, Draco, he and I have quarreled, which shouldn't surprise you given the quarrels I've witnessed between you and your godfather. Though I do detect less animosity in you when you speak of him these days. Not that he's interested anymore in sticking around long enough to hear my opinion about it-"

Gilderoy roused himself out of his bitterness to give an unfortunately forced smile, just as their topic of conversation entered the library tower. The presence of Severus, noticeably awkward and stilted around Gilderoy as well as Draco now, put an end to all productive discussion.

The afternoon of the tests for Apparition licenses, which had slipped Draco's mind he would still have to attend, Harry brought news that seemed to be depressing him. Even more than their copies of *Common Apparition Mistakes and How to Avoid Them* seemed to be depressing Ron. Though Draco was privately of the opinion that if Ron had lived through Draco's sixth year nightmare of trying to help *Vince and Greg* with Apparition, last minute- not in the *worst* experiences of sixth year, but definitely in the top three or four- well, Ron would be more sanguine about his own chances.

Nor did Harry have any reason in Draco's mind to lament the news that Dumbledore would be discontinuing their private lessons until Harry got Slughorn to cough up the information. As far as Draco was concerned, being relieved of spending time with Dumbledore- that was, *Albus* Dumbledore- and not *celebrating* it was akin to the poor penitent in purgatory, informed the path to heaven was now open to him, instead gloomily inquiring of the angel as to whether the steps to paradise had proper guide-rails.

"I know you hate the man," Harry hissed, while Draco tried and failed to hide his pleasure. "But this is important!" He lowered his voice and glared. Likely his ire was really fueled by resentment he couldn't join taking the test. "A lot could depend on those lessons. On that memory I need from Slughorn. So don't look *so* chuffed at my failure."

"Oh, my *boyfriend's* failure, that I wouldn't countenance," Draco agreed equably. "But my good friend's? That I might find myself able to bear."

No, the real news to lament was the passing of Aragog the great spider, once mistaken as the monster of the Chamber of Secrets. Hagrid sent Harry a note bewailing the loss, a note Draco promptly snagged for him and Luna. Bafflingly, Luna commented she would indeed have loved to have met the poor Aragog fellow. She was alone in that, before Harry had to tell her she wasn't invited.

Draco was, and he immediately began to concoct any desperate excuse he could to skip proceedings. Hopefully Apparition testing would somehow go long.

"He's mental!" Ron exclaimed. "That thing told its mates to eat Harry and Draco and I! Told them to help themselves! And now Hagrid expects us to go down there and cry over its horrible hairy body!"

"If I wasn't a fair hand at manipulation," Draco agreed- read, if Aunt Bella hadn't been so competent a tutor at the Imperius curse- "We might well be long-decomposed contents of that corpse's stomach." Just like Dantanian in Astaroth. "But sure, R.I.P., hell-spider."

"It’s not just that," Hermione added, looking around anxiously before Draco cast a belated Muffliato. "He's asking us to leave the castle at night, and he knows security's a million times tighter and how much trouble we'd be in if we were caught."

Ron and Hermione began to make excuses for themselves, while Harry peered at the missive from Hagrid with that unfortunate do-gooder look dawning on his handsome face.

Thankfully, Hermione said no in Draco's place. "Harry, you can't be thinking of going. It's such a pointless thing to get detention for."

Unfortunately, Neville was off somewhere, so Luna was fully attentive to Aragog's plight. "I don't know, Hagrid has been awfully kind to-"

"And we will find ways to requite that kindness," Draco cut in, "That do not involve risking ourselves and our- in my case quite dubious- academic careers for the interring of a creature who was happy to serve his sentimental benefactor's friends to his brood for a light spot of nibbles before bed."

"Well said, well said," Ron said, and Draco gave him a surreptitious little high five behind Luna's back.

"Look, Potions will be almost empty this afternoon, with us all off doing our tests... try and soften Slughorn up a bit then!" Hermione offered Harry, which did the job of distracting Luna as well. Irrepressible girl was always up for a good mystery, and was more curious than the lot of them what skeletons her Potions master had in the closet.

"Lucky. Harry, that's it- get lucky!" Ron said suddenly, and proposed that the use of Felix Felicis might not go amiss as a trial strategy. Hermione seemed stunned at her own lack of innovation, and hastily seconded the notion. In retrospect, it was obvious to use up a bit of the gold stuff, for such a presumably key task for the fate of the wizarding world.

Although that didn't keep both Draco and Luna from exchanging a sour look at the mention, remembering their escapade with the potion in fourth year and the eventual result. Well, it wasn't the potion's fault they'd taken it too early to get the job done. Still- *unlucky in the use of luck*!

"I dunno... it's not actually mine, Ron. Remember, Draco's the one who won it. He just gave it to me back then for- for safekeeping, I suppose?" Harry looked unclear on that point.

No, because you're the bloody savior, and you're the one who won it in the blue loop. "It's yours, Harry. I'm not taking it back. Whatever you see fit to do with it, it's up to you, not me." *Maybe this was how you got it out of the old sluggy bastard the first time round, and I've just narrowly averted ruining any chance of overcoming the old* snakey *bastard, by not stealing it from you.*

"Are you sure, Draco?" Harry said anxiously. "That potion is rare, and expensive, and-"

"And given your current terms with your godfather," Ron said cannily, "Doubt he's going to be giving you any more out of the blue any time soon. But you see how important this is, right?"

Ron and Draco were on the same wavelength that afternoon. "Yes, and even if it wasn't, it's Harry's. What's mine is his." At the disbelieving look they all gave him, it seemed at his unusually accommodating manner, Draco smirked and shot a half-lidded look over at Harry, more effective through a sleek curtain of pale than dark hair. "If you think it a bribe for your affections, Potter, by all means, take it as one."

It was a long time Harry spent staring at Draco, red-faced and speechless, before any of his attention could be returned to Ron's plan. "Come on, listen to him, you gormless lot," Draco urged. "He's the one who had the plot to save Harry from the Death Eaters at the Ministry last year, and here you see the Chosen One before you, putting up noble obstacles to his own success as ever. It was a great plot, all I had to do was murder one person in the process. Yes, Cannon's the brains of *this* operation." He put in the stress for Hermione, and with a bit more coaxing, Harry agreed that after one last try that afternoon, if he failed, he'd put the stuff to use that night.

"Just be careful," Draco cautioned. "First gulp, it gives you such a rush, I lost my footing, first time-"

"Given that only a drop or two is necessary at a time, for one person," Hermione said sharply, "That shouldn't be a difficulty."

After Hermione had her own ego satisfied, by haranguing a richly deserving Draco and Luna for profligacy during the Triwizard Tournament, the bell rang for the test. Draco threw an arm around Ron's shoulders and promised Ron success. "It's inevitable," Draco whispered dramatically, "Given the droplets of Felix Felicis I put in your water this morning," and Hermione let out a muffled shriek.

"Draco, that's cheating! That's illegal!" she hissed, but Ron ruined Draco's fun with his damned sensibleness.

"Sorry, Frankenstein, that's only going to work one time," Ron laughed, not slow to sense a recycled trick after a childhood with Fred and George.

He still sounded glum, but at least he'd been distracted by Draco's subpar attempt at deception. Hermione kept sputtering about Draco's lie, not quite convinced. That kept Ron's spirits up all the way up until they reached the Entrance Hall and found Neville. The four test-takers parted from Harry and Luna, with sadly a kiss goodbye only for Neville, and Ron boldly strode into the jaws of his personal Armageddon.

Armageddon was kind to such intrepid challengers. Granted, Ron did contrive to leave half an eyebrow behind, near Blaise Zabini at that. But a look from Theo of all people silenced Blaise from calling out the mistake. Maybe that was a sign vengeance did not burn eternal, or maybe Theo just felt them beyond such childishness.

Despite this rare show of Slytherin mercy, the approaching examiner did seem liable to notice it hanging in the air in Ron's wake, until Draco stepped forward with a lilt in his voice and a toss of his hair. By the time he was done his offensive of flirting at the man, Draco didn't think the bloke would have missed one of his *own* eyebrows left behind.

So they all four passed, Draco and Hermione as a matter of course, though Hermione was ecstatic anyway, and Ron and Neville too in something of a surprise victory. They even managed to surreptitiously recover Ron's half an eyebrow on their way out. It had them in a celebratory mood at dinner that night, with Luna insisting they all congregate at Ravenclaw for her to give a proper toast to the victors. Harry, unfortunately, was not among the number of the successful, having gotten Slughorn alone for once and still not dragged it out of him.

"F," Draco hissed in his ear, "*F*," and gave a meaningful glance. After Harry just stared at Draco distractedly, Hermione nudged Harry in the side.

"That obviously stands for Felix Felicis, for the record," she whispered, and Harry managed to get his mind out of the gutter long enough to agree to put Ron's plan into action that night.

Draco let the Gryffindors part from them as they all headed to their common rooms, though Luna and Neville's affectionate farewell had Draco linger near Harry as well. To think Draco

could ever find himself jealous of the love life of *Neville Longbottom.*

"You want any other gifts for luck?" Draco teased lightly, and Harry just smiled at him, tension written across his jaw and shoulders.

"It's good to see you back with all of us like this now," Harry said quietly. "Back in all the swing of things, like you're part of it again."

Draco could have hit him. "Harry," Draco whispered, "If you're going to patronize me, I'd just as soon as offer a kiss for luck to the Ravenclaw eagle knocker."

Harry contrived to look resentful even of that magical object, if it were to get a kiss from Draco. "No," he muttered, shifting, the fate of the world on his shoulders and yet as artless and open when it came to his feelings as the day they met. "I didn't mean to. I just- I mean seeing you happy, or even just seeming a little happy, for a moment- that's gift enough."

Draco wanted to kiss him. He bit his tongue and stood there instead, to give Harry the chance. When he waited enough to embarrass himself and found nothing forthcoming, he gave Harry his most contented smile, and left with Luna for Ravenclaw.

The next morning found him in Charms with the Gryffindors, and Harry abuzz with a victory of his own. *Horcrux*, the word came through, within the bubble of Draco's Muffliato. *Horcrux,* a word Draco could not remember if he had heard in the newspaper or in Hogwarts the day Harry killed Voldemort all those years ago, but it had a resonance beyond its mere sound, even before Harry explained its awful truth. Maybe Dantanian had already known what it meant.

Harry ended his narrative with Dumbledore's promise to take Harry along, should he find another Horcrux to pursue, and Draco was filled with misgiving, though he didn't know why. He stared at his flask and turned it into wine with distracted ease, matching Hermione's completed one. If they'd had an infinite supply of vinegar, swill that the transmuted stuff was, he'd have happily gulped down them both before making new samples for Flitwick.

Maybe that was why Flitwick hadn't given them an infinite supply of vinegar.

Horcrux still echoed in Draco's head distractingly, until he found he had gotten out the talon wand, and was staring at it more fixedly than even Harry or the wine. "Draco," Hermione whispered in his ear, "What's wrong?" and followed the direction of his gaze.

"Are any of you thinking it?" Draco said to all the Gryffindors, gesturing to his wand. Harry blinked, always slow to pick up when it came to something negative about Draco- damn the eternal trust in those green eyes- but Ron understood after a few significant jerks of Hermione's head.

"I don't think it's, er, anything like that, mate," Ron said uncomfortably. "The whole, um, situation you've got there, with..." He seemed to be having the same difficulty saying the name as he would have with Voldemort.

"*Dantanian Noir*," Hermione said in a stage whisper, reproaching Ron's hesitance. "Of course there isn't. You are not carrying about a part of Dantanian or Bellatrix Lestrange's soul with you, so don't even think that. This whole business with the codas... I can see why you'd remember that, with the business of Horcruxes, but there's a key difference-"

"Contemporaneity, and intentionality?" Draco said wryly. "At least according to the *myth*?" Whatever superficialities, it seemed indisputable they were at least similar.

"Splitting the soul, they said," Harry said, catching on, and touched the talon wand as fearlessly as he ever had, to put it in Draco's pocket. "And Horcruxes aren't for casting magic. They're for *immortality.* Dumbledore explained it like that."

"Isn't Dantanian immortal?" Draco hissed, an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Draco Black," Hermione said adamantly, still more confident, "Don't torment yourself unnecessarily. Dantanian Noir is dead."

"Flitwick," Ron warned hurriedly. Draco's Head of House was coming towards them to check their work, and only Draco and Hermione had accomplished the task at hand. Draco took down the Muffliato, but first-

"You're right, though," Draco agreed with Hermione hurriedly, to get her off his back if nothing else. "They're different."

His self-reproach made him careless. He thought he had time to charm Ron and Harry's vials into wine for them, without Flitwick noticing. He didn't.

He left the classroom with yet more detention, Hermione's severe disapproval for so much as making the attempt, and Harry's mood dented, due to Draco's self-absorption. Draco decided to finish denting it for them all. Before he and Hermione parted from the Gryffindor boys, he caught Harry's hand and said, "I don't care what this all *means,* really, Harry Potter. Just know that if you get yourself hurt chasing after all this shit for *Dumbledore*, *I'll* be the one doing the splitting apart." He made the straight wand gesture and mouthed *Sectumsempra* before he pulled back.

Harry didn't let his hand go that quickly. Draco's attempt at menace seemed to have had an opposite effect, as if he'd just been shockingly sweet. "Don't worry. I won't," he said quietly, and shot Draco a smile like a kiss before he let him go.

The enticing but elusive notion of hellwater from Gilderoy's Pensieve was not one Draco could let go of. The next time he could make it to Xaphan, at a time he was sure Severus wouldn't be there, was Sunday, right after their official visit. Draco made the irritating trek

and Portkey journey all the way back. Then it was another Portkey, much to Gilderoy's unsteady reticence, to the place of nightmares, L'Infern in reality.

The reality did hold a none-too-kind dark wizard. This one went by the name of Igor, with a face like his Animagus form would be one of the gargoyles of L'Infern. With the sun still up in the sky but setting, Karkaroff looked particularly like something carved out of stone. Still, the man could be unexpectedly useful, like the gargoyles. Draco explained they had come to search for any useful clues on the aigua infernal, the hellwater that filled the Estany de L'Infern, and Karkaroff's response was like a thunderbolt.

"Oh, that? The water? I know all about that." Karkaroff assumed an ire for both of them without specificity. "It was considerate of you to warn me about that, before you abandoned me here. That my magic could be taken for one small swim."

"Did you go inside it?" Gilderoy gasped, hands to his mouth dramatically, and Karkaroff scoffed.

"No, I did not go for a *swim*," Karkaroff said pointedly. "I read about it in a book I found. I have been collecting them from the ruins." At Draco's half-incredulous, half-accusatory look, wondering what plotting had led Karkaroff to want to stay here, Karkaroff raised his hands defensively. "Why not? What else have I to do here all day? Some men are intelligent enough to *learn* about the hell castle where they have been put!"

He sounded like a nasty Hermione then, and like her, it did not take him long to produce said book from a stash. L'Infern was in better repair than Draco had realized, from where Karkaroff took them to get it. Karkaroff had scrounged together a solid roof over his head and walls out of mixed gray and tan stone, the same slate and limestone that composed the upper ridges of the Pic de L'Infern, like the dragon's spine. His ability to manipulate the ruins to do so became immediately clear in its provenance, once Karkaroff produced his own copy of a book. Disappointingly enough, it was one both Draco and Gilderoy were more than familiar with: *Construction and Deconstruction* by Dantanian Black.

"We know that book," Draco said with a sigh. "We're using it ourselves."

Karkaroff gave an almost Severus-like eye roll as he opened the tome, flipping straight to a section near the back. He handled it with a familiarity not even Gilderoy could boast of. "*Peculiarities*," Karkaroff read in a meaningfully bored tone, "*Of L'Infern*."

"Dantanian Black knew about Castell de L'Infern?" Draco gasped.

Gilderoy put a wondering finger to his temple before he abruptly nodded. "Right! Right, I suppose he must have, for there to be a section in this book!"

"You never showed it to me! And I've been using this to help you with Xaphan!"

"Well, it never would have crossed my mind," Gilderoy said, the one on the defensive now. "As it says," he pointed out, head leaning over the shoulder of Karkaroff, "*Peculiarities* of Xaphan. That means... things unique about it."

He sounded almost sure about that point. One could not tell if Karkaroff's visible performance of nausea was for the proximity with Gilderoy, or that slight doubt.

"So what use would it have been to you?"

"Of use now that I need to know about the *hellwater*," Draco said, trying to keep his own irritation from his voice. But really, *Karkaroff* should not have had to be the one to point this out. "Certainly a peculiarity of L'Infern, one would have to say. Now, where does it mention it, and what does it say?"

"I don't have this to memory," Karkaroff groused. He eventually produced the page, which had an entry several pages long in the encyclopedic catalog of peculiarities: early, since Dantanian too used the word *aigua* for water. "Aigua infernal," Karkaroff read, and when Gilderoy made a face at his pronunciation, *ah-EE-gah in-FER-null*, Karkaroff threw the book in Gilderoy's face and demanded he read it aloud instead then, if the peacock was such an expert.

Gilderoy touched his face where the book had struck it, and sought assurance from Draco it hadn't left a lasting-looking mark, before he would indignantly fluff his blue coat and pick the invaluable tome up from the dust. Perhaps not quite so invaluable, though, if it was the same as the copy they had at Xaphan, and why had Draco never considered there could be a connection? It wasn't like the castles were dissimilar, and the gargoyles were *identical*, with identical spells controlling them for Gilderoy... identical spells *very useful* in the construction of Xaphan, with the almost suspicious speed of Gilderoy's rebuilding perhaps aided by architectural and structural similarities with *L'Infern*...

"Did Dantanian Black help *build* L'Infern?" Draco blurted. "Or did a person who did it help *him* with Xaphan?"

Gilderoy was cut off in his reading, so far much the same as Seguinus had told in the Pensieve, though Draco had been kind of tuning him out. "I don't know, honestly," Gilderoy said, hanging his head. "There's references to both in books- I used some building plans for Xaphan in reconstruction *here*, when there were none for L'Infern. There is, erm, a likeness... but I can't work out *when* each man lived. Seguinus always claimed *he'd* built L'Infern, but I didn't know if that meant he'd helped this Dantanian Black, here or with Xaphan, or vice versa- or even that before they had been born, they could have been the same person..."

"And you've kept this to yourself?" Draco said in disbelief. "Bloody *hell*, Gilderoy." He heard notes of Ron creep into his voice. "You had a leg up in rebuilding Xaphan the whole time, and never told us. Trying to seem more impressive than you really were?"

It didn't *quite* make him a fraud. But it wasn't exactly reassuring to keep discovering these small details that changed Gilderoy's story about L'Infern, over and over. If only because it might turn out as so key to option three.

"Forgive me," Gilderoy said in a small, wounded voice, "If I did not want to dwell upon the connection."

He didn't elaborate, but he didn't need to. If he'd played the victim card, so to speak, at least he'd played it too well for Draco not to at least stop and take notice of his point.

"You didn't want to think," Draco surmised, "You'd sworn an Unbreakable Vow to the descendants of a man who was friends with Sade, whose castle and wealth might have been built upon some relation to Sade. Or even..." Draco's own blood seemed to rebel in its confines at the notion. "*Of* Sade's blood ourselves. You didn't want to have gone from rebuilding a castle Sade made to rebuilding another castle Sade made. From serving him to serving... his descendant." It was easy to forget Karkaroff's quiet, resentful presence in the rush of sickening realization, all the many things Gilderoy must have had in his head that he wouldn't say. "I don't remind you of him, do I?"

Gilderoy looked bewildered at the idea. "No. Not in the smallest particular. The only person who reminds me of him is- not important," he cut himself off, though Draco was sure he'd been about to say *Severus*. "It might not be so significant. Dantanian lists L'Infern as one of his seven great fortresses of Europe, and he has insider knowledge of all seven, without specifying how. There could have been limited contact, between Dantanian and someone else who knew L'Infern, or even just letters, or a third party between him and Seguinus. My idea that Seguinus could have been the practical founder of House Black as an institution was ridiculous-"

"Even though," Draco said tightly, "Dantanian Black never married, and disappeared one day without explanation. And... what are the chances, that you'd *flee* Hogwarts, only to end up in the proximity again of one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, one of the most key to Hogwarts and the *war*?"

"Not *very* unlikely," Gilderoy said with a nervous laugh, lest Draco think the coincidence some sinister contrivance. "Given that my friend Jordi-" *read, his conned ex-lover and victim Jordi-* "Was a monster-hunter, and I was following his path to try and find him. House Black *does* seem to have had a proclivity for monsters."

The dark hair and eyes of House Black- the coloring could be Spanish- Dantanian could have gone to Spain before his disappearance, or have had family or ties there already that drew him back, before he was turned here- the visual resemblance isn't absent- he could have had contact after his turning, or sent money- our wealth- and more than any other in the Sacred Twenty-Eight, our naming by fallen angels in the older generations, our obsession with blood- *I don't want to believe this- and there's the pyromancy- no, that was from the Weston girl, the grandmother, I have to stop thinking of this or I'll go mad-*

Karkaroff let out a yawn. He could not have seemed more bored if he'd been listening to third-year Hufflepuffs gossip about the Yule Ball. "What do you want to know about this hellwater? That is why you are here, no?" He skimmed through the pages, looking eager to rid himself of his unexpectedly emotional, rambling blond visitors. "Here's a passage on its effects. He says there's a lot of misconceptions, but that brief contact with the water is usually harmless for a wizard, unless there's full immersion. Then the magic leaves the wizard, but only for a matter of hours or minutes, depending on the strength of the severed magic clamoring to return. The fabled robbing of magic only takes place permanently with immersion of the wizard for a longer time- it says it varies due to strength again, but it would

take at least the rise and descent of one moon, immersed up to the throat. Maybe faster if the water freezes. Then there's a passage on its duplication-"

"Duplication?" Draco gasped. "That's what we need. Duplication!"

Famed dark wizard Karkaroff gave Draco a look that seemed impressed by how dark a wizard *Draco* was. "You wish to create another hell lake?"

"Not lake," Draco wheedled. "Just a little bit of water. Like, a hell-pond. A hell-puddle."

"A hell-puddle," Karkaroff breathed, looking so traumatized he was regretting ever learning the English language.

"Höllenpfütze," Draco added helpfully, in case the English wasn't clear. His recent trip to Berlin had taught him both nouns, for the weather and for the Paris Panthers. "No lake needed. Only enough to submerge one person. Just one."

Karkaroff gave a shudder, then looked between the two as if suspicious he would be an intended victim. "Well, you're out of luck there," he said maliciously. He tossed the book over contemptuously. "The ritual requires the *highest* concentration of hyper-concentrated moonstone. *Ulles de 'milluna'.* And *mil* is a misnomer. Far too small." Karkaroff's pronunciation was only decipherable by looking at the words, but the English was written there clear as day, the level of moonstone quality needed. "So much," Karkaroff pronounced with sadistic glee, "That the shattered moonstone from the ritual must cover every *centimeter* of ground that one wishes to transform into the pit of aigua infernal. So needless to say, impossible-"

He broke off at the sight of Draco and Gilderoy exchanging meaningful looks, for once both totally Ravenclaws at work. "*If*," Draco said warningly to Gilderoy. "*If.*"

Gilderoy still waved his arms about in a bit of a dance, and let out a small restrained, "Yay!"

"What?" Karkaroff barked in alarm. "You don't have that? Do you? *Do* you?" He leaped to his feet after Gilderoy and Draco rose, suddenly fearful to see his unwelcome visitors depart. "You couldn't possibly replicate that, could you? Who are you planning to-"

"Karkaroff, I mean this in the nicest way possible, but if we wanted to drown you in hellwater, we'd just cart you off and chuck you right into the lake over there, yeah?" Draco jerked his thumb in the direction of Estany de L'Infern. "No new Höllenpfütze necessary. Now rest assured in the knowledge that you have been exceptionally helpful, once again, and found my favor."

If was indeed the operative word.

Meanwhile, there was Harry, and the distance remaining. Between them, for one, stood the great divide of Quidditch, which had once been so instrumental in forcing them into contact,

like two sticks striking sparks between them. Now Harry was in the thick of it again, and Draco couldn't even pick who to properly support.

The Quidditch championship had, like last time, fallen between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, with Slytherin nowhere in the running. Draco wished he had a way to contact Millie, and see if her non-spying for him extended to telling him whether anyone in light of this underperformance missed the Kingsnakes.

At least *slightly*.

Three hundred points for a victory margin- read, 150 aside from the Snitch catch, that would give Gryffindor the Quidditch Cup. Ron was obsessed with this huge margin, and remembered the Kingsnakes obliterating teams with the Quaffle, so much so they'd made up for a whole missed Snitch catch to win. That meant Ron pestered Draco as well as Harry endlessly about tactics and brainstorming, which put Draco in an awkward position with all his Gryffindor friends, given that he was at least ostensibly a Ravenclaw now. That certainly was enough to keep him from giving Ron any of the diagrams he'd used from Viktor last year.

"Come on, isn't it enough that I had to put up with that sod romancing my girlfriend the whole year?" Ron groused, while Hermione's cheeks turned a faux-cross pink at Ron's show of jealousy. "Can't *I* get some benefit out of it, other than a place for *you* to launch your continental adventures?"

"I can't turn on Ravenclaw completely," Draco sighed, wording a betrayal of where his allegiances truly lay, whatever color of tie was around his neck. Even if they'd never gotten close, he really was grateful to his dormmates. If only for putting up with him during this year's mental breakdown. But more than that, turning his back on Ravenclaw would feel like a betrayal of Luna, who remained firmly enough behind her own house to render Neville's loyalties murky- however much she urged Draco to root for whoever he truly wanted to win.

The Kingsnakes. I'm like Millie. I wish the Kingsnakes still existed, and that we were going to win.

But that sentiment was hardly constructive.

"At least look at this play I drew up for our Chasers, then," Ron needled, and Draco was guilted into compliance.

Unfortunately, a knot of other seventh-year girls passed through the Great Hall at that very moment. Cho Chang came to an abrupt halt at the sight of the famed Kingsnakes manager, caught red-handed assisting the enemy. She stood there silently, pretty dark eyes accusing, but her following was not so circumspect.

"What are you doing? Aren't you supposed to be a Ravenclaw?" Marietta Edgecombe called bluntly, and Draco didn't have to even think before giving a retort to the likes of her.

"Weren't you supposed to be a part of Dumbledore's Army?" Draco called back, imitating her intonation and pitch.

A great deal of his year in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff burst into laughter, remembering her far realer betrayal, squealing to the hated Umbridge.

Even from a distance, Draco could see the girl's eyes fill with tears- deserved ones, good riddance- before Cho put an arm around her friend's back and led her furiously away.

Ron gave Draco a wordless, speculative, hopeful look. It was clearer in intention than Harry's almost wounded look, as if he'd seen the part of Draco he didn't like so much.

"No, Ron, just because there are nitwits in my house, I will not give you Viktor's plans."

"But really, if you want us to beat Cho Chang's lot..."

Draco gave Harry his most reassuring smile and toned Ron out.

The world had gone Quidditch mad. He'd even overheard Gilderoy asking Severus for an update about the big Gryffindor-Ravenclaw match once it was played. Frank and Alice had told Gilderoy of it. Apparently these ostensible parents, restored with the psyche of recent Hogwarts graduates, were major enthusiasts. They wouldn't be attending, though, and Sirius and Remus also meant to keep to their policy of not attending any school Quidditch, after the debacle in fifth year at Gryffindor-Slytherin.

Harry complained to their friends that he could have used the support, with his own boyfriend in the opposing house, before he jolted, realizing his mistake. Apparently spending all your time in a tight conspiratorial knot of six or seven friends was not conducive to disentangling from a romantic relationship with one of them. Draco certainly could never have guessed that, or counted on that to his advantage.

His planning really had suffered, it turned out, when it came to academics. Not only was he severely behind in all of his classwork, after disinterest and outright missing a month, his memory of anything regarding memorization and dates was the worst of his Hogwarts years. No wonder, given the greater interval of time, as well as his greater distraction this year in the blue loop. Unfortunate, though, given that the work was now NEWT-level, meaning anything beyond practical and spellwork seemed outside his usual intuitive grasp. Some classes, he'd simply stopped trying. After all, he'd never had to face sixth-year *exams*.

Maybe a part of him was counting on Hogwarts to fall whatever he did, his monitoring of the Room of Requirement notwithstanding: with Voldemort's intactness or very life on the line from Naufragiam, the hourglass was running out of sand. He didn't know what else stuck out as a potential route of invasion, apart from the Hog's Head, which was supposedly thoroughly well-defended. But he wouldn't put it past the snake bastard to launch an outright frontal assault if need be, and succeed at it.

Unless- well, unless Draco could save *Albus Dumbledore*, and he really needed a better plan for the endgame than he'd thought up. He hadn't decided how much to follow the old timeline, and accept that Dumbledore's death was a condition perhaps necessary for Harry to

defeat Voldemort- or admit he might have changed things enough that saving Dumbledore was paramount, in keeping their side strong enough to ever give Harry the chance now to-

That wasn't his affair. What fell on him was what to do about Nurmengard, and he wasn't any closer to an answer there either. He would tell the others what he and Gilderoy were up to as soon as they had anything concrete, but there was embarrassingly little to show, save the need for moonstones they couldn't find or get to. As it was, the only yield for their sneaking about was Harry developing a disturbing if hilarious preoccupation with how much time Draco spent with Gilderoy.

At least the question of who to publicly support at Gryffindor-Ravenclaw was solved for Draco: namely no one, as his godfather had other plans for him. With that lack of planning or effort academically, Draco inevitably missed his next Defense essay. The purr of "Detention, Mr. Black," was not long in coming. What was a surprise was Severus's smooth drawl after, "You will serve this detention at 10 o'clock on Saturday."

"But then he'll miss the Quidditch match!" Harry protested from his seat on the other side of Hermione, loyally raising his voice to the last person who would ever want to hear *Harry's* cause. Especially when it was protesting keeping him and Draco apart. Even Ron looked taken aback by Harry's misjudgment. "It'll decide the cup!"

"*Mr.* Potter," Severus said silkily, crossing over closer to regard Harry with a far realer ire than Draco had received for failing to write an essay. "Apart from your decision to speak out... of... *turn.* If it has escaped your notice, Mr. Black happens to currently be a *Ravenclaw. Worrying,* such gluttony for punishment, *Potter*, to fight to keep another supporter at the match *against* you..."

The Slytherins and a fair number of the Ravenclaws broke into laughter. Harry, being Harry, did not shrink back, but stiffened up straighter at that. He glared at Severus to show he wasn't intimidated. Even if he didn't offer a retort. That might just have been because he couldn't think of one.

It was only once Severus had swept past with a majestic flick of his robe, and begun the class, that Draco realized. That might have been his chance to make a grand public gesture for Harry. As Neville had once done for Luna, to win her back. *Drastic measures*, he'd called it.

The only thing drastic was Draco's personal *and* physical frustration. He ended that day and the next up to the night before the match possessed by the conviction he had to do something about Voldemort, about Grindelwald, about Harry and this damnable gap between them when every day wasted could be from such a *limited* supply, and yet there was nothing to do but wait.

Pretend to be a normal Hogwarts sixth-year, as he'd once lamented to the headmaster- *How long do you expect me to keep playing possum*- but play he was again.

He thought of trying to invite Harry out for a night flight that Friday night, a midnight interlude between just the two of them like in years past in the opposite roles. But he lost his

nerve at dinner that night, and spent midnight alone, tossing his wand in the air half-hoping and half-fearing it would somehow fall and break.

He saw Harry at breakfast that morning, but couldn't bring himself to leave Luna and go over to sit at Gryffindor. Harry showed none of his distress, not the way Ron and even Ginny seemed to near him- Draco wondered if a certain ex-Kingsnake also had a vested rooting interest for Gryffindor as well- but Draco knew Harry too well to think his nerves would not be absolute murder right now.

He wished he had given Harry some piece of jewelry to kiss for luck, some inane gesture that would mean a great deal to Harry. He dwelt gloomily on the memory of the golden rose ring he'd made to track Harry in fourth year, and what had become of it. Remembering it on his father's hand and how he'd burned it right into the seared flesh turned his stomach. And it sent his mind rattling down the road of inventorying so many other mistakes, so many things he'd done which put him at disadvantage. It made him hate to remember himself in that position acting as he had, a stranger, whether tainted or vindictive fool.

He filled the second role soon, in part. He whispered a quick message of luck in Harry's ear, and went back to Ravenclaw tower to grab a book he meant to give to Gilderoy from his dorm. On his way down the staircase, though, a shrill female voice arrested his motion. "Him! It's him! It's *his* fault! I bet *he's* the one who set them up to work together!"

Marietta Edgecombe was standing near the foot of the stairs, pointing at Draco accusingly. She seemed to have spoken with her audience in mind. A great number of Ravenclaws, many in ostentatious supporter garb, were piled around the common room in various states of unhappiness. Luna and her eagle headpiece were nowhere to be seen, probably already in the stands with a number of her housemates. But for those that remained, it seemed that end days were nigh.

At not the eye but the epicenter of the hurricane was the most important Ravenclaw in the world today, sprawled across one of the blue velvet armchairs with her face red and swollen as a great pustule: Cho Chang, who lifted her face and shrieked, "That's right! Him and his whore of a cousin!"

Draco went from bemused to homicidal in an instant. The talon wand came out and he shoved his way through the crowd towards Cho, people soon parting from him in alarm. "How dare you?" he bellowed. "How dare you? What did I say the day I became a Ravenclaw! The past was the past, but no one *ever* speaks ill of *Luna Lovegood*-"

"Not Lovegood!" one of Cho's friends yelped. "Cho doesn't mean Lovegood, please don't hurt her..."

Draco reached Cho in time to see her face contort in frustration as well as despair. "That's right," she hissed, looking less afraid of Draco than the tear-stained parchment on her lap. "It's *Nymphadora.*" She enunciated each syllable like a separate epithet for *whore.*

"Tonks?" Draco said, blinking bemusedly. "Oh." He lowered his wand. "Well, that's alright then." He considered a bit longer. "Wait, why is cousin Tonks a- word you shouldn't use for

another woman whatever the circumstances, Cho, really, I would have thought a sportswoman like you would conduct yourself as a feminist-"

"Look!" Cho groaned, shoved the parchment at him, and buried her face in her hands. Draco looked down, wondering if the letter was from Tonks. He didn't recognize the handwriting. It didn't look whimsical enough for her. It was steady and masculine, with a resolve behind the words, as well as style, that spoke of a decision made in full confidence. It read,

Dear Cho,

I feel terrible writing this to you right before your final match. I didn't intend to leave it this late. I don't want to hurt your chances. I wasn't sure if I should come before. Now I've realized that to be honest and true to myself and both of us, I can't attend and support as your boyfriend. I can't be your boyfriend anymore. I'm so sorry.

Cho, you didn't do anything wrong. There's nothing wrong with you. You're an exceptionally sweet, bright, and brilliant young woman. I'm sure that one day you'll find someone else just as incredible as you. But I'm not in love with you anymore. I'm not sure I ever was, now that I know what real love feels like.

I'm in love with my mentor, the master Auror Nymphadora Tonks. You would always get angry about how much I talked about her, and I guess you were right. I was falling for her and I didn't realize it. I know it's wrong, that she's my superior. Nothing should ever happen between me and her. But I can't help it. She is all I can ever think about.

This is not her idea, or her fault. Nothing has ever happened, and she has never encouraged me. When I told her how I felt last night, she rejected me completely. She said it was impossible, because of our positions at work, even if I were single. But I should be single regardless. I can't lead you on, Cho, and I can't pretend I feel something I don't. That's wrong. It's not fair to you. So I'll tell you the truth, that my heart belongs to someone else.

I didn't choose to love her, I couldn't help it. I hope someday you will understand and that we can be friends again. I wish you all the best, in your match and in life.

Sincerely,

Cedric Diggory

It had taken everything in Draco not to burst into laughter in several parts. Finally, he folded the letter in half with an impassive look, and handed it back to her. "Well?" Cho demanded, another tear streaking her red cheek. She could not have looked any more different in that moment, one had to acknowledge, than Tonks. "What do you think?"

"I think," Draco said honestly, "That if I were you, I wouldn't be showing that all about the common room."

"But you understand!" Cho exclaimed, arms sweeping out wide as if to gesture to the cosmic injustice of everything that existed. Draco had to admit in himself, he very much wanted Harry to beat her to the Snitch. "That bi- that *woman,* Nymphadora, she's seduced him away from me!"

Draco squinted. "The letter, er, rather said the exact opposite, didn't it?"

"That's how I know she did! She's in *your* family, isn't she?"

To Draco's surprise, there were murmurs and nods of agreement all around the common room, particularly from Cho's little coterie. "What's that supposed to mean? You mean House Black?"

"Of course!" Cho exclaimed. "Everyone knows how- seductive all you are, how you can get people to do things they wouldn't normally do, with people they wouldn't. There's Harry Potter and *you*-"

"For your information, not that this isn't thoroughly disseminated through the rumor mill," Draco said tightly, less amused, "But Harry and I are currently *on a break*-"

"And there's the best Defense professor we ever had," Cho went on, "Good old kind Professor Lupin, throwing away his job and his pride for some swaggering murderer-"

Draco managed not to draw his wand right in her face, but it was a close thing. Still, a number of people shrieked and ducked behind others at the sight of his wand in his pocket. Cho broke off, paling. "You wouldn't," she said hastily, looking to regret every word spoken in the irrational haze of heartbreak. "You wouldn't- curse me or my tongue, you can't, I'm your house's Seeker, about to play for the cup-"

"That's right," Draco agreed with faux amiability. "I can't." He pulled out his wand and raised it instead to the face of Marietta Edgecombe. "Langlock!"

Marietta's half-shriek was quickly locked away, and Draco was free to stroll out of that common room like his uncle, with only one small first-year yelp of, "But she didn't say anything!"

Draco turned and faced his house, wondering if they'd be about as friendly to him as Slytherin were after this. *Collective culpability,* he could have said, or just, *That's my parents.* "Oh, but Marietta *has* said so *many* things she shouldn't have in the past, hasn't she? Say that about House Black. We might be a great lot of swaggering murderous whores, but we know how to keep a grudge. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm late for detention."

Severus ignored him during his detention period, which seemed to stretch on forever without any news of the match. Except then he looked over from where he was floating rubble out of the future dorm area, and he knew. He remembered how bitter it had made him- had it really been just last year? - to see Sirius and Remus celebrating their minds out for Gryffindor

winning. Now he had to draw closer, abandoning the last bit of his job to find out for sure what they had doubtless somehow learned.

Frank had picked up Alice and was spinning her around before kissing her, both of them startlingly young and muscular after their year of occupation rebuilding Xaphan. And so alive, at what turned out to have been their son's updates: Luna had sent them her protean coin from Dumbledore's army, so Neville had been writing the score for them all match. Alice called Draco over and gave him Luna's coin to give back, before letting Frank sweep her up in his arms again.

Draco stood there shyly, unsure if he should join in the revelry. Remus abruptly detached himself from trying to snog Sirius's face off to regard him fearfully. "Oh, Draco, there you are! I hadn't realized- didn't think- oh, you are a Ravenclaw now, after all. Everyone, we shouldn't be celebrating like this-"

"It's okay," Draco said carefully, "I wanted Harry to win." Even now, he could not quite bring himself to say the words, *I wanted* Gryffindor *to win.*

"Then come here, dragon-face," said Sirius, and enfolded Draco in a hug he knew he did not deserve in any timeline or universe, but Draco leaned into it the same.

"I just didn't think I had a right to celebrate with you," Draco said in a small voice, and Remus rubbed his back, with the unfathomable comfort of his gentleness soothing for Draco's racing thoughts.

It almost made him guilty for what he was planning without them.

On June 5, 1997, Draco Lupin Black officially came of age. Turning seventeen, he was now a legal adult, with all the rights and responsibilities- and dangers- that status entailed. Hermione said the world should be quaking if it knew well enough to. The ground literally trembling beneath them, for fear of Draco all grown up. It was not a joke very like Hermione, but then, despite her rueful smile, she hardly seemed to be even half-joking.

Unbeknownst to her, he had plans for his birthday beyond just the party that night he pretended would be a surprise for him. (Luna was singularly bad at keeping secrets from her cousin.) 17 years old marked him as different in some ineffable way according to the wizarding world, perhaps with his magic. But more than that, it marked so much *time* as passed. There was no hesitating anymore to try every recourse, however potentially humiliating.

The only difficulty was how Harry had taken to watching Draco on the Marauder's Map again. He knew Draco heading to the Room of Requirement meant Draco sneaking out through the Hog's Head. With permission of Aberforth, the one of Draco's previously secret collaborators who didn't make him pouty, and usually towards the one who bafflingly did. Draco's jaunt to Hogsmeade and then Xaphan was cut off by Harry at the pass. He caught up to him and demanding to know what he was doing before he could even get the Room of Requirement open. Damn that Seeker speed.

"Where are you going once you leave Hogwarts? On your birthday, no less?"

It *was* a Thursday, which meant Draco had cut a pretty clean path from their shared Transfiguration class up towards the secret Hogwarts exit.

There was one natural lie. But Draco had just seen Sirius and Remus during his approved hours at Xaphan, a castle it felt like he'd attended school at more than Hogwarts this semester. And if he'd been going to see them, Harry would have known about it anyway...

What am I thinking? It's easy now that I've dropped the veil. Tip to posterity, forget about moral questions, lying is overrated because it turns out to be so much work. *Why don't I do something novel and just tell the truth?* So Draco told the truth, to the extent he could quickly explain: he had a plan for Grindelwald, but to do it, he needed hyper-concentrated moonstones, and he knew where to find them.

Harry looked rather gobsmacked at Draco's revelation that he planned to attempt to follow Dantanian's footsteps at Xaphan in any particular. Let alone genuine, if comparatively mild, blood magic. But it didn't keep him from demanding he get to come along, and have it all explained to him on the way.

"You know this probably isn't going to work," Draco told Harry, as he fiddled about with a stone transfigured to Portkey on that warm June day. The back alley of Hogsmeade kept anyone away with his large Inmotus, but it still felt exposed. Then, he always felt personally a bit exposed around Harry Potter. "I mean, leaving aside that I already tried a few months ago and nothing budged-"

"You don't think you've changed at all since then?" Harry said earnestly, and Draco somehow doubted he just meant today's birthday.

"Unless meeting Grindelwald somehow infected me with something transformative, no. I'm still just me," Draco said, and did try not to make that sound like a death sentence.

Harry's response was as simpering as a Hufflepuff's. "I think that's something to say for already. Just being you. If it were up to me, I'd say you were more than worthy."

Draco couldn't just let that stand. "Huh. Interesting standards you have there. More than worthy to be the rightful heir to House Black and this whole castle around us, including what the door hides. But not worthy to be with Harry Potter."

"It's not- I told you before, it's not about worthiness. I just want to figure out if we me as people work together. Not just," Harry ducked his head shyly, "Our bodies."

Draco thought just that was not the smallest thing to discount, but he knew it was a lost cause on that front. Better to just tease Harry. "In any event, Gilderoy thinks I'm worthy of House Black, and that's more than affirmation enough. If *Gilderoy* thinks it."

"You really are a slimy bastard," Harry muttered. "As if Professor Lockhart is a decent judge of anything. You spend too much time together."

"Do we?" Draco said, amused by a new proof of Harry's jealousy, albeit towards the most unlikely recipient. He supposed it didn't help that now, he couldn't explain his real reason for saving Gilderoy in the first place: Gilderoy's feelings for *Severus.* Not now that they stood even a chance of bearing fruit. Still, Draco had never witnessed anything quite like the spectacle of a half-single Harry Potter, chomping at the bit with rage, over how much time Draco spent with *Gilderoy Lockhart.*

Draco activated the Portkey after deciding he'd goaded Harry enough. He was pleased to see that with the amount of experience he'd been getting, he was accurate enough to deposit them more specifically where he wanted in Xaphan: right at the threshold of the observatory. Draco raised his gaze from the rubble where they'd been unceremoniously dumped, right to the etching of the name DANTANIAN at the observatory's entrance.

"I don't know what it says, you know," Draco admitted as Harry gallantly helped him up. "That this place let in my Dantanian."

Harry shrugged, not indifferent, but truly unable to provide reassurance, when put so far out of his depth. "This looks just like in the memory. I watched it a lot, you know. Trying to understand you, what influence Dantanian might have had on you-" Draco tried not to flinch at that. "But I kept coming up empty. You two react to things so differently. What I did notice was this place. I've wanted to come see it. It felt... I don't know, like somewhere where..."

"Where wars could be won or lost?" Draco swept out a hand to encompass the rounded building, including the fatal name at its height. "Where it's decided whether or not the moon rises or falls from the sky?"

Harry, incredibly, bit his lip and flushed darker under the June sun, as if Draco had just overtly propositioned him with those unremarkable words. "See, I don't need to kiss you and all sometimes. I don't even need to touch you. Not when you can talk like that. You don't know how you get my heart racing. There's no one in the world like you."

Draco scoffed. Fine talk without action. "Isn't that you putting me on a pedestal like you said you wouldn't do?"

Harry's lips scrunched up. "But I really do think you're exceptional. Am I supposed to lie?"

Now Draco was the one who had to struggle to keep his composure, even looking down, where he was struck by the way that Harry's afternoon shadow fell onto his own over the broken stone. "And I really do think you're deluding yourself, but in any event, the observatory is real enough. Come in and see the place that rejects me but accepts Dantanian Noir."

"You are seventeen now. Officially come of age. Maybe that can mean something, magically. My God, this place..."

Draco looked around, unable to find what so impressed Harry in the broken astronomical instruments and dusty shelves. It was, one had to acknowledge, incredibly *well*-preserved in comparison to the area immediately outside the observatory, as if some spells had kept everything preserved but for the natural floating of dust. "It looks barren, I know. But I think

this is what Xaphan was built *for*. To house and protect this observatory. This one room. And the things that were meant to dwell inside it."

Harry's gaze drifted to the solid obsidian floor, which alone gleamed enough to show back his lovely reflection, and through the open ceiling, to the brilliance of a deep blue summer sky.

"The three mirrors," Harry said, with healthy reverence in his voice. "Dantanian really had them all?"

Now Draco was the one disfigured by jealousy. "And he scattered them, the fiend. I'd almost rather he turned more children into Dementors. Joking!" he hastily added, at the face Harry made. "So yeah, if I somehow get this open, there'll be more use to it than just the moonstones. This is where I'll put the Mirror of Erised. And anything else we end up needing to keep safe."

"Are you ready to try? Don't put it off," Harry urged. He watched as Draco withdrew his sixth-year notebook, better-prepared this attempt with a brighter state of mind. He skipped past the list of goals at the front to try and avoid disturbing his faith in himself. But really, taking stock now at his birthday as a mark of a year almost ended, he'd left more many ends loose or failed than he could ever recall: he wasn't *sure* there were no secret ways to enter Hogwarts, he hadn't gotten Severus to stop spying, he *had* let Harry out of his clutches, he hadn't won his mother over to their side, and he hadn't killed Aunt Bella. Say this for him, though. No one valuable to him had died, and he hadn't killed anyone. Though the year wasn't over *yet*.

But maybe he could keep it that way, if he got into this inner sanctum of Dantanian Black's. The mirror sanctum, one might call it. With all the power it held, and the secrets more he might come to own.

"I have the form and words from the memory written down," Draco said, showing Harry the relevant pages near the back of the book. "It's like Dantanian wanted someone someday to be able to replicate it." Draco thought of Dorian then. "Not House Black, he wanted us all dead. But yeah, someone, for another twisted old family."

"Go ahead," Harry urged, sensing Draco's stalling. That made Draco just more eager to stall on.

"This is strange. Have we ever done this, just you and me, a nice casual mid-afternoon blood ritual?" Harry's appalled stare made the words all the sweeter. "We should have done this sooner. This is nice. As a date, it beats Madam Puddifoot's."

Harry collected himself enough to get a bit of a smirk back, though that face on him was always a cute one. "Oh, so this is a date?"

"Of course," Draco said, and pulled his moonstone dagger from his pocket. Not enough moonstones on its hilt to make a good enough Höllenpfütze, not even if he tried to requisition back the moonstones he'd used for Sirius and Remus's rings- oh, to see the looks on their faces if he tried to explain that one- but certainly enough to freak out Harry Potter.

"I walked out on you on Valentine's Day, didn't I? I'm sorry. We'll finish that date here," Draco singsonged, playing as if they were still together, as he toyed whirling the blade about in the dusty air. The blade glimmered in the sunlight, as did the very particles of dust, floating in a haze like summer had come too hard too soon. "If you like, before the blood of House Black is spilled, you can hold the blade up again to my neck."

Harry's pupils dilated, green eyes darkening, but he only dignified that sensual memory with a mutter of, "Evil dragon. Just do it."

"No, here. Do it for me." Draco held out the dagger, with the moonstones in the hilt glimmering the most brilliant, true millunas as any there could be. He admired his memory of those stones against Harry's palm, hilt in his hand as Harry did threaten him with it for the fun of it. He hadn't drawn blood then, but he had to now. "I want you to cut my hand. I hate having to do it to myself. And if anyone's going to do it..." Harry looked away, perhaps excited or perhaps disgusted, but Draco insisted, "I want it to be you. I want you to cut me."

It seemed Harry's reaction better conformed to the first option. "See. The things you say, dragon. If you could hear my heart right now..." Draco lowered the dagger and stepped forward, reaching a hand out for *Harry's* throat. "That wasn't an invitation!"

But he stepped closer to let Draco encircle his fingers over that place on his neck, thumb beside his Adam's Apple with two fingers landing on the pulse point. Draco resisted the urge to poke playfully at that sensitive place, just to see what would happen, and felt Harry's heartbeat. It was a discernible vibration against his fingertips, a soft rhythm that seemed to increase further at the proximity.

Harry's heart was beating faster for him. Right there, under his fingers, a discernible bit of physical life, undistinguishable from the golden thread of Harry's potent magic near the surface, Harry inclining towards him, feeling for him still whatever they called themselves or did together, whatever way they touched. Harry's heart was his.

I don't want to die when the time comes. Please, I don't, I don't want to die. I don't want to sacrifice myself, that doesn't make any sense, I can't give up-

Shut up, Malfoy.

"Do it. Cut my hand," Draco ordered. "My palm." He pulled it back and offered the skin to Harry. "Cut my palm. Just a little cut."

"Okay, fine. You'd better hold still." Harry took pains to do so with the least actual blood liberated possible. When Harry cut him, it hurt less than a paper cut.

"Well, that was anticlimactic. Open the book for me to copy, to make sure I get the Wheel of Hecate exactly right. That is one place Dantanian had me beat." After a second, to be clear, Draco added, "Painting like a Muggle, you know?"

Harry nodded, looking concerned for Draco. But his palm barely hurt even before he healed the wound for himself. With it closed up, he used the blood that had pooled as his paint and smeared it down onto the obsidian, making the Wheel of Hecate from the diagram with ease.

Far harder was parting with a bit of his hair, and letting the light wisps fall where they would over the red wheel.

"You can do this, Draco. I know you can," Harry said intently, though there was a certain anxiety in his words that belied his confidence. Maybe Draco should have explained that the worst that could happen from a failed ritual was Draco's embarrassment.

Except not being able to get Grindelwald out of Nurmengard could result in far, far worse. "It's not a matter of trying hard enough or wanting it enough. I'm being judged somehow. Either I'm good enough or I'm not, and I don't exactly get to plead my case."

"Sorry," Harry said, abashed, and Draco relented.

"No, I'm just going to hate failing at something in front of you."

"What, like the times I beat you to the Snitch?" Harry teased, and Draco remembered the frustration, but also catching a different Snitch and transfiguring it for this incredible boy, into a golden rose.

"Exactly like those times," Draco agreed, avoiding the bait. "Alright, prepare yourself not to laugh at a real fucking anticlimax. I am the rightful heir to House Black." He let out the words as flippantly as Dantanian had in the memory, as little convinced of their possible efficacy. "Dignusanguine!"

And then the door opened, and the sanctum of Citadelle Xaphan opened to Draco Black.

"See, I knew it," Harry breathed. "Didn't I tell you that you could?"

"Don't be smug, gorgeous."

Harry reached out and gripped Draco's hand, keeping him with him in front of the luminous threshold. His face descended, like he meant to kiss it, but at the last moment he rubbed his cheek against Draco's palm instead, breathing out the words against his skin as he nuzzled it. "Admit it, Draco. This proves it. You can do anything. You *are* worthy."

Would Draco ever be able to tell him why he *wasn't* worthy, or at least why he hadn't used to be? He had to wonder ruefully at that, moment of success undercut as so many of his were by his own head. Would this Langlock ever break? *Before the Battle of Hogwarts, whatever I choose, will I ever get the chance to tell you who I actually am, and then you can choose whether or not to love me?*

But then, someone *else* could tell Harry. If he took Harry to Grindelwald, *Grindelwald* knew. And maybe even once Harry did know, Draco's Langlock could break with him. *I could tell him the whole truth like he's always wanted. Give him all of me. Before the end.*

Draco took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and walked into the chamber that shone like the entire moon.

The effect was like an aquarium, as cavernous as it was liquid, the light above and light below. The memory had not captured the way the obsidian floor, without a speck of dust to

hide its reflective surface, was a perfect rounded mirror. Like there were stones underfoot already to crack into fragments of glimmering helldust.

The room was at once unending, with moonstones smooth and slick like stepping underwater, and claustrophobic. It made the dust and decay of the observatory outside surreal in comparison, as if impossible in such a fantasy world, where the abundance of magic was the guarantor of threat...

Time to walk the steps of Dantanian Noir.

Draco went towards the center of the sanctum. Harry followed him.

It was a bracing but thrilling feeling, like climbing down willingly into a great abyss, with wonders and terrors of the world unfurled to your every side. Every moonstone was so bright, they were like the prophecies in the Department of Mysteries they'd broken too. Each must also have their own story- and they surely did, if you counted the unfurling of thousands of moons on certain historical nights- but these were unlabeled, all together. At once a hoard and the most wasteful, decadent decoration imaginable, as if in the heart of winter one had to purchase with moonlight every single flake of snow.

Draco took the dagger from Harry and looked. The stones were the spitting image of one another.

Even the threefold pedestal that marked it as the sanctum for the hallowed mirrors was awash in glittering reflections. The moonstones themselves refracted small images of Harry and Draco as they braved this crystal grotto, with its full shelves of notebooks and its three alcoves that were its reason for being, all empty. One would be filled, and one from the looks of it could hardly miss being filled. As Draco had suspected from the memory. Based on the high obsidian stand in the third alcove, with a rounded slot at its top near eye level, the Mirror of Esplice was not much bigger than Draco's palm.

"Oh my God," seemed all Harry could say.

There was nothing really to say, in the face of that kind of beauty, and danger. But Draco spoke anyway, a weak little jest. "Looks like the Mirror of Erised has found a new home."

"All to plan, you madman?" Harry laughed, looking shaken too by what Draco had been able to uncover. Or maybe that it had been Draco who had been able to do it.

"Everything in time. Each piece in its place in my design." When Harry frowned, Draco made a playful face at him. "You know madmen have their own mad designs."

"It's so beautiful," Harry exhaled, then added incongruously, "It looks like your room at Grimmauld. Or- like you. Pale, and shining."

Draco reached out to a rounded object of similar size to the Mirror of Espilce's holder, the closest moonstone on the wall. With a light, hissing sound, it came off cleanly into Draco's hand, leaving an egg-like impression in the bare gleaming obsidian wall that had held it. The

walls behind the hoard were not flat, but seemed shaped to each individual stone. It held them as precisely as Draco had shaped Sirius and Remus's rings to hold their stones, cut small.

See, Father. I can't be so useless and disappointing if I'm worthy of all this.

Even if Dantanian was too, whatever that meant about worthiness, if it was ever just more than power. And of course Dantanian had his stash somewhere Draco don't know. The stones must have been two or three thick in places along the walls, if some still weren't already.

"All this is yours?" Harry asked, dazed, and reached out to take a stone out of its holder right by the hollow Draco had left.

It didn't budge. Harry pulled hard, time and again, and didn't so much as make a dent, palm gliding over it as ineffectually as if he was trying to turn a liquid solid with only touch.

"Yes, then," Draco said, and handed Harry the stone that had so willingly surrendered itself to his hand. "I suppose it is."

"What are you going to do with all this?"

"Have you ever wondered why the Castell de L'Infern is called that?"

"Castell de L'Infern?"

It looked as if they were in for a long explanation.

But it wasn't one he minded giving, nor a secret it pained him to give away. Not to Harry beside him with the light off the moonstones flickering across his face like it shone most strongly from him alone.

It was sweet to celebrate a birthday party, catered exclusively by Dobby this time, with all his friends. But today it was a mere pretext for what Draco had to tell them, once the festivities were over. They all clustered together, and from how quickly they launched into serious talk, Draco wasn't the only one who'd had business on his mind.

"With every day that passes," Ginny began unceremoniously, "Aren't we risking more and more that You Know Who could go find Grindy? Even just because- sorry- Draco's movements somehow have drawn attention to Nurmengard? Like a self-fulfilling prophecy? Hermione, you said there were what, three options..."

"Option three is not up for discussion," Hermione said. But Draco fancied a bit more doubt in her tone.

"We all know what option three is here," Draco drawled. "Right?"

"It's worked with Karkaroff..." Luna said in a devious little voice, rubbing her fingertips together.

"Option three? No clue, mate," Ron said. Neville looked similarly lost.

"Then it's better not to say it," Hermione said, as if speaking the mere words would let evil out.

"Is it to just kill Grindelwald?" Ron asked. "So if we can't get the mirror, no one can? I mean, he's a-"

"Continued liability still," Draco finished, "If we haven't figured out about the *mirror*, though, exactly, we'd still have to get his corpse out of Nurmengard-"

"A helpless old man," Harry finished instead, "Who we'd be killing without giving a chance to fight for his life. Whatever terrible things he's done in the past, we're not executioners."

"Premeditated murder is never an option," Hermione said, horrified. "Of course not. That's against everything we stand for. If we stoop to that, between us and the Death Eaters, there's not enough difference anymore."

Draco shrugged. "Well, we do have better hair."

At a room full of glares, he turned serious again. "Of course it isn't an option. Hermione, if you have a better idea than option three, let us know, but the clock is ticking."

"Option three would be terribly exciting, if that's a point in its favor." Luna clapped her hands together. "Oh, what a feat to achieve!"

Neville watched her glee with a familiar-looking helpless fondness. "To achieve what, darling?"

"To break out the Prisoner of Nurmengard and take him for ourselves!"

That got crickets.

At the silence of the others, Hermione's like the grave, Draco joined in on Luna's light tone. "Castell de L'Infern *is* pretty big. What's one mountain dungeon fortress to another in the end?"

Harry was already informed to a point. "Your plan would be to hold him captive still, but at that castle in Spain where they held Lockhart?"

"Gilderoy is now technically its lord, and controls its wards," Draco explained, and Ginny held up a hand.

"But are we really considering staking our lives and futures," she asked with a visible shudder, "On a plan which hinges upon stealing the magic of Gellert Grindelwald?"

"Um," Draco considered. "Yeah, pretty much. You wanted to be part of this, Ginevra Weasley, well, welcome to the show."

"Guh," went Ginny, and buried her face in her hands.

None of the others were fully on board at first either. But Draco was resolute.

We should do this. We have to, for the mirror. And for Harry. Because I have to. There has to be someone *who can tell him the truth about who I really am.*

You wanted to know *me, Harry? Come with me to Nurmengard.*

Höllenpfütze

Chapter Notes

Playlist

For the one who had done this before, Draco was the most unaccountably anxious about their plan for Nurmengard. The other moving parts seemed calm and confident. That was, as calm and confident as Gilderoy Lockhart ever seemed to get.

Gilderoy and Harry each seized their sides of the globe Portkey with far less apprehension than Draco inwardly harbored. "Aren't you terrified to even lay eyes upon the dread fortress of Nurmengard?" Draco prodded- *aren't you terrified that the ritual rests squarely upon* your *shoulders, Gilderoy*- but the answering laugh had no more than a healthy amount of nerves present.

"I know it *could* end up worse than L'Infern, but..." Gilderoy briefly lifted a hand off the Portkey to gesture about with expressive incoherence. "One mountainous hell prison to another is, as you said, 'not that much of a stretch.'"

"What he's saying, Draco," Harry said, touching his shoulder with that ever-steady potency of presence, "Is that you've got him in a positive state of mind. Because he believes in you. We all trust you, dragon. And we'll follow you."

"It is not so scary, Nurmengard," Draco agreed for their sake, not sure if he was lying.

The Portkey came to life, startling a quiet and contemplative Dobby, who gripped tighter. Gilderoy squawked and lunged forward just in time not to miss it. Their four were whisked away from the chosen midpoint to somewhere far colder.

The globe dropped from their hands, and might have shattered if Harry hadn't nimbly caught it, just before it could rebound into a second craggy snow-scattered rock. "My word," Gilderoy was saying as Harry gave back the globe, which rather resembled a snow globe for a moment. Harry and Draco's hands touched, a moment of suspended time as Harry's fingers lingered on the back of Draco's hand.

"My word," Gilderoy repeated. "Nurmengard *is* quite something, isn't it? Well, I suppose, in fairness to my *own* craftwork, they *do* say it's more difficult to keep an ancient castle in spiffy repair- as opposed to just up and building a new one, like the nouveau riche..."

"Gilderoy Lockhart is needing," Dobby interrupted solemnly, "To take Dobby's arm to be Apparated inside Nurmengard. So Gilderoy Lockhart is needing to stop talking."

They all obediently took hold of Dobby, huddling together against the force of the alpine wind. Draco put one hand in Harry's, the other in Dobby's, and steeled himself for more than what came. He dreaded the jump, as if somehow this time, the wards would slap into place and tear them in two for their affront. But there was only the exceptionally crisp, clean snap of house elf Apparition. Just like that, the Boy Who Lived took his first step inside the crumbling halls of Nurmengard.

Draco had been awed by these surroundings on his first couple visits, but thus preoccupied with his company, he was hardly impressed by the cracked open roof, or the wind it let in slapping tangible ice crystals against his lips. It would have been expedient, for him and Harry to warm their chapped lips on each other's, but not yet. Maybe soon, maybe never again. That was what hung precisely in the balance, above the small matter of Grindelwald's life and death, and a mirror.

"We'll do this in the foyer," Draco ordered, taking them to a room which scarcely deserved the appellation. Still, there was space enough of relatively unbroken dark stone for a surface, in the entrance to the great spiraling center staircase of the tower. The only real adornment to their ritual would be that mysterious dark basin marked with the symbol of the Hallows, which Gilderoy gave a look like the nest of a venomous snake.

Harry obediently laid down his heavy, *heavy* pack, at the center of the rough floor, while Gilderoy dropped his load of brooms with a relieved sigh. "Be careful, two of those are Firebolts," Harry cautioned, as if Firebolts had been released before Gilderoy was sucked into his vampiric self-improvement camp of sorts. As it was, Gilderoy just looked very simple in his blinking confusion, blue eyes squinted hard still from the blow of the past wind.

"Okay, Gilderoy, you lay things out here. Dobby, you'll be keeping an eye out for any intruders. I mean, the worst possible should be Apparated in by the place's house elf, and their main menace is alimentary, but keep watch anyway. If there is trouble- well, you know what to do."

"Return to Xaphan," Dobby recited, "And tell Hermione Granger and everyone what has happened. Dobby is not to involve himself in any fighting." Dobby hesitated for the first time. "And if no one is at Xaphan..."

"That won't happen," Draco said lightly. "Hermione promised, and she's far too stubborn to be shook loose. And hey, someone's gonna have to stay to look after the less exciting dark wizard we've taken into our captivity." Dobby as well as the others grimaced at the reminder of foul-spirited Karkaroff, who had been moved to the cellars of Xaphan for at least the beginning of Grindelwald's inhabitance of L'Infern. Best to break the Prisoner of Nurmengard gently into the idea of having a roommate.

"Harry, you're with me. You've got the raw power to blast down any smaller wards keeping Gilderoy in his cell." Draco felt absurdly like he had as the manager of the Kingsnakes, clapping his hands and calling, "Let's do this, people! Let's move!"

There was an echo to his voice that he didn't remember here before, reverberating off bleak walls once so full of suffering. But even as he heard it, he was sure it was his nerves talking.

He grabbed his Firebolt and mounted it resolute against his own trepidation, and Harry seemed to copy his reserve.

"You know this place, don't you," Harry observed. "You really know your way about."

"Just try and keep up!" Draco rose into the air and Harry followed. The departing form of Dobby and the gleam of Gilderoy unloading moonstones faded into the distance below them, as they shot straight up the center of the spiral, towards the tallest of towers. Not the worst thing, to once again find himself flying at top speed beside Harry Potter.

Goading Harry had him chasing Draco closely on their spiraling way up, as if they were nowhere more bracing than a Quidditch pitch. Their soaring was much like the alpine wind had been, carefree and scything through the air with intent purpose. In response, Draco heard his own laugh picked up over the walls like a shrill and awful thing, maniacal or perhaps just manic in sound. Harry's laugh was somehow lower, purer, as he called out, "So this is what you've been doing this year instead of your Defense homework!"

Draco was left playfully sputtering until they reached the summit, the threshold of full and total disintegration of this uncomplicated happiness between them. The door where it waited, death, the death of the person Harry had thought he loved, and the birth in those eyes of the Death Eater who'd taken twice to get it right...

Maybe Harry would pity him, at least.

At the start, though, Draco was more worried about Harry erroneously pitying decrepit old Grindelwald, in his sad squalor- but no squalor was actually forthcoming. Draco had forgotten many of the room improvements he'd made in that longtime cell during his first visits, lavishness in trade for secrets of the mirrors. He was like the world's most eccentrically paid interior decorator. As it was, they found Grindelwald comfortably housed, draped in deep blue fur robes in place of rags, from the same shop Draco had bought Gilderoy's. The mass murderer was calmly sipping water from a garishly transfigured cup, embossed with the Hallows.

"Hello, Draco Black," Grindelwald intoned, not looking up until he had made sure he'd finished that share of the day's water to the last drop. "Hello, Harry Potter."

It was a good thing they'd propped their brooms up outside the cell, or Harry would have dropped his precious Firebolt, potentially a long way down. Grindelwald's nonchalantly informed greeting had on Harry what was clearly the intended effect. Harry jolted away, nearly all the way back out of the cell, and the corner of Grindelwald's wrinkled lips twitched.

"How do you know my name?" Harry gasped, and looked at Draco in confusion. "You said he hasn't seen any papers since- since back when we were little, so-"

"Don't panic, Harry, it's just his omniscient act he likes to try and pull off," Draco said impatiently. "One of his parlor tricks. Easier in an improved parlor." Grindelwald lifted the gold goblet in archly grateful acknowledgment. "Grindelwald can't read your mind. He can just use observation well. Sherlock bloody Holmes here..." Another twitch of those sly lips as

Grindelwald put the goblet aside. "Last time, I told him you were in my year at Hogwarts, so looking at us he could have guessed. That is, if he didn't overhear you bellowing about our shared Defense class." He gave Grindelwald his best lofty, unimpressed look. "Or he could just be looking at, I don't know, your lightning bolt scar."

Harry brushed his dark bangs over it quickly, abashed. "Oh, right," he blurted, starting out off-balance, no doubt as intended. "Sorry. Er..."

"As I was about to say- I had no intention of *hiding* it, believe me, I am not accompanied by a seasoned master of disguise and deception- Gellert Grindelwald, Lord of Nurmengard-" He seemed to like the ironic title. "May I present to you... the slayer of dark lords, Gryffindor at large, victorious Quidditch captain, Boy Who Lived, the prophesied savior of the wizarding world up to and including your gawping neck, Harold James Potter."

"He has very green eyes. You might do well to add that to his list of accomplishments. Yes, quite the specimen indeed," Grindelwald cooed, as if he had a pet Rottweiler who'd just brought him back a particularly intriguing decapitated head. "But- the slayer of dark lords? Should I be quavering?"

"Only," Harry said curtly, "If you don't intend to cooperate."

Draco could have smacked him. Talk about exactly the wrong approach. That direct, strong-arming tactic against *this* man was about as likely to get the man talking to them as casting Langlock. "I apologize for my companion, Grindelwald. He's a bit overawed by your castle."

"No worries, my dear. Such a fascinating creature he is. And how time flies," Grindelwald marveled showily, and raised his wrist as if checking a nonexistent watch. "Could it be September already? How quick the summer in the alps, and how long the winters."

"We're not here for the mirror," Harry began, but Draco raised a hand to cut him off.

"So you have him in the know," Grindelwald observed. "I would have thought you a more solitary operator, Kaktusblüte. Is he appraised of *all* you know about the mirrors?"

And there it was, the real reason Harry was up there at the cell. That Grindelwald cut right to Draco's weakest point, and in such a pleasant tone- any reaction of Draco's part would tell its own story. But then, this was a story Draco *wanted* told. After so long. Finally. Finally, finally told.

"Do I know everything?" Harry asked Draco uncertainty, the remainder still there of- not distrust, precisely, but inevitable misgiving. "I should, shouldn't I?"

"Unless there's something else that Grindelwald could tell you," Draco said, none too subtly. "That only he could tell you."

Grindelwald's face broke into a broad, rather ghastly grin. It looked rather like Draco's manic laughter sounded as he flew. "My, my, Kaktusblüte. And that is why the Boy Who Lived dogs your footsteps? Careful, or I may grow infatuated with you, Mr. Black. Such daring! A life with you seems in little danger of becoming *boring*."

"It's not that. I just don't have much time to waste," Draco said, as casually as he could. But that would be let out to Harry soon too, through this dark lord's mouth as well.

"Don't you?" Grindelwald's eyes went keen, searching. "Is that your decision? How personally disappointing."

"I haven't made one yet."

Harry made a valiant attempt to get included in the conversation. "What are you two even talking about?"

Grindelwald folded his hands with a singular smugness. He might even have looked pleased, to hear Draco had not definitively settled upon the course of self-sacrifice. "Mr. Potter, it is precisely the inquiry at hand. Information you indeed must not be appraised of, regarding the Daughter Mirrors."

"Tell him," Draco urged, all his vocal cords drawing taut enough they felt they would tear. "Just get it over with. Bitte."

"If I must. Poor little poison flower. Well, my newest visitor, what your companion here wishes to impart is that- mmm. Mmm? Ah."

Grindelwald reached up, mouth opening. It seemed his tongue had locked.

"No," Draco breathed. "*No.*"

His wand pulsed in his pocket.

Grindelwald tried again, once his tongue dropped from the roof of his mouth. "Draco was- hmm. Ah. Oh. It seems my tongue won't work when I try to tell him that you- urgh. Ah ah ah. It won't! It won't work!" He sounded, the old bastard, positively delighted, perhaps by the sheer novelty of this news.

"This had better be some sick joke," Draco snapped, drawing his wand and feeling it hot in his palm, impregnated with a rising hysteria. "You had better just be playacting to scare me."

"What's going on?" Harry asked naively. "It's like you have Langlock, but only sometimes." He turned to Draco, with no conception of the immensity of the prospect that had just gone up in flames. "Does he have some kind of curse on him?"

No, I *do.* "No, I don't," Grindelwald answered promptly. "Apart from the bondage of my magic to this overblown rock heap, which has retained me here all these years. Oh, Kaktusblüte, amusing as this is, I *would* be quite pleased to see the look on your pretty pet hero's face when I tell him- mmm! Argh." Once more, the rush of famously silver-tongued honeyed words died in the throat.

"What is he trying to say to us? Do you know? Could he write it?" Harry asked tentatively.

"No, that wouldn't work either! He's trying to say that-" When Draco's tongue locked as faithfully to his own mouth, as always, he concealed it, waiting for it to unlock. "Damn it,

Grindelwald! Damn it all! You *could* say, before..." Tears of frustration threatened to prick at the back of his eyes. Was it his fate, then, to remain forever separate, forever lying, to everyone but the most evil man he had ever known?

"I'm sorry to have disappointed you, Kaktusblüte-"

Harry was ever a wealth of ill-considered curiosity when it came to Draco. "What is that you're calling him?"

"Oh, that? An endearment well-suiting such a sociable and high-spirited young man. Kaktusblüte. No?" he laughed, seeing Harry's German-averse stumped face. "It's much like the English. Cactus bloom. Cactus flower. He *is* rather like a cactus, with its sting. And with this new lovely light hair I have been so remiss not to comment on earlier, so very much the flower." He paused then with a calculated look, watching Harry, before adding, "So very beautiful-"

"Don't talk about him that way, you're too old to notice how he *looks*," Harry sulked.

"Well, young gentlemen," Grindelwald said smoothly, while Draco impotently pocketed his wand, and put both his hands to fists. He dug his nails into his palms to hold back the wetness from his eyes, the complete and irretrievable bereavement, because there was nothing else to say. "I will speak however you like, if I only may look forward to more of these droll tête-à-têtes in the future. Even if I was not as helpful today as I naturally wished. It does become exceptionally *lonely*-"

"You won't be lonely much longer," was all Draco said in return, out of patience.

Harry caught his drift. "Maybe later you could prove more helpful, too."

"You'll be *alive* in the future, for one. I think all of us here can agree we want that," Draco said wryly.

Grindelwald picked his goblet back up and raised it gracefully. "Here, here."

There was a conspicuous silence, then, before Draco nudged Harry. "Oh, yeah," Harry reckoned out. "Definitely, ah, no murder. Murder being, er, not good."

"And how do you intend to protect this old sack of bones," Grindelwald sighed melodramatically, "From the attentions of some ill-famed ophidiophiliac, upon whom this one here did what one must class as a questionable job murdering. Protection, I do assume, with an expiration date of September. But what *is* the direction of these hints? The inferior pretender will search for me here- but my Kaktusblüte is surely too clever to think it remotely possible to shelter me *outside* Nurmengard."

Draco merely arched a blond eyebrow at him, regarding proceedings now from a distant sort of detachment. There was no time for mourning a thing he should never have thought possible to begin with.

Grindelwald took on a genuine frown, to go on about more impossible things. "You *do* know it can't happen. The wards are simply impossible to bring down. Hundreds made the attempt, against magic I myself designed, to undo the binding of a wizard's magic to unbreakable wards. But they are strung and plaited together so soundly, they are knots, so intricate and taut it would take fifteen hundred lifetimes to untie the half of them. Surely you know how many hundreds have tried within and outside Nurmengard to liberate me, and failed. Surely you are not about to disappoint me by being boring."

"Sorry, Grindelwald. I think you'll have to put up with being bored again for a little while."

A dual Bombarda broke Grindelwald out of the cell easily enough. It was more difficult to get the yawning dark lord onto the back of Draco's broom and down to the foyer. It became more difficult to keep Grindelwald cooperative once he saw what awaited them. The great mass of millunas had been laid out in what was... some sort of misshapen oval, hardly inspiring excessive confidence, in its resemblance to-

Bloody hell. Gilderoy had shaped the moonstone covering, meant to be the shape of a circle, to a more Valentine's-themed variety.

"Why is the hell-puddle going to be a *heart*?" Draco hissed into Gilderoy's ear, and Gilderoy started and gave his work a fearful once-over. Grindelwald was looking at it far more appreciatively, seeming taken aback by the quality and beauty of the moonstones on display. Let that occupy the old blowhard for a while. It *had* been many years since he'd seen such beautiful things.

"It's not a heart, is it? I suppose there is a bit missing from the top, where I was sitting as I arranged the stones..."

"Gilderoy. This is a perfect bloody heart."

"Oh, *no*," Gilderoy said sadly, and enlisted Draco and Harry's help in quickly reshaping the moonstones into a more reputable form, as close to Resurrection Stone-perfect a circle as could be made. It was, Draco judged as he tilted his head, a surface area more than sizable enough to contain a wizened old dark lord in his first bath in far too many years. Enough even, perhaps, to contain *two* wizards, should the aforementioned dark lord prove obstinate in his relation to the hell-puddle.

Then the universe encountered a sight that Death himself could perhaps not have predicted.

Gellert Grindelwald, asked to put his faith in the magical abilities of Gilderoy Lockhart.

"So," Grindelwald said, neatly cutting off Gilderoy's attempts to introduce himself. "It seems that the sanctum of Dantanian Black has been opened." There was no other likely explanation readily available explanation for the hoard on display, and Draco didn't insult his questioner by making the attempt. "By the rightful heir to House Black."

Grindelwald nodded in acknowledgment to Draco, then his gaze went back with fierce, almost longing intensity towards the moonstones, and perhaps the concentrated power and danger they embodied. They would need to keep an eye on that urge in the dark wizard, to be sure. And his reckless curiosity, to immediately walk amongst the stones towards the circle's center.

"The rightful heir, who would kindly thank the Prisoner of Nurmengard to keep from dragging his big feet in the ritual site," Draco appended.

"Frankenstein, he's upsetting the arrangement," Gilderoy fretted, loud enough for Grindelwald's surprisingly keen ears to overhear. "He's ruining the Höllenpfütze!"

"Höllenpfütze," Grindelwald echoed contemplatively, and Draco heaved an inward sigh. "Perhaps I should not be stepping here so easily." His steps took him with unusual rapidity out of the mass of moonstones.

"Professor Lockhart, maybe it's not the best idea to tell him it's..." Harry began in tentative criticism, and Gilderoy puffed up his cheeks.

"Well, that's why I said it in the German," Gilderoy explained, as if that was perfectly logical.

"He's Austrian," Draco groaned, and got no reaction. "Where everyone, you know, *speaks German*?"

"Ah," Gilderoy said, cheeks flushing. "Well, er, that would do it, then, hmm? Apologies, Draco..."

Grindelwald's lip curled, looking caught between disdain and alarm. "My dear Kaktusblüte, do you travel *exclusively* in the company of physically blessed but intellectually stunted Gryffindors?"

"Hey," Gilderoy said defensively, drawing his faded blue furs about himself. "I am a *Ravenclaw.*"

"Indeed you must be," Grindelwald concluded distastefully, clearly noting the resemblance between their gifted garb. "Mr. Black, tell this flaxen-haired subordinate that I have no intention of taking part in any ritual that would admit him as a participant." Gilderoy let out an indignant squawk, but Draco put a comforting arm around Gilderoy's shoulders, and gave Grindelwald a shark's smile.

"Don't worry, my lord," Draco soothed him. "No need for you to take any part in the *ritual.* Alright, people, look alive, let's get this show on the road! The Quaffle won't put itself in the hoop!"

They all gathered in front of the circle of moonstones after undoing Grindelwald's damage, the sheer glow off the millunas a more powerful light than the filtered outside impression of day. Even Grindelwald sidled up to try and get a look at the relevant page in *Construction and Deconstruction,* though this time Gilderoy had the sense to shield it from his eyes. "Oh, quite simple, really," Draco concluded. *Compared to other rituals I've done.* If he'd had to

arrange the moonstones in the shape of the wheel of Hecate, then he could have been worried.

The only one to balk was Gilderoy, perusing it more closely this time and seeing the mention of his blood. "Don't worry, don't worry, we'll heal you right away," Draco soothed him, but in truth, the stiffening of Gilderoy's shoulders seemed to be for the memories that evoked, whether of general blood rituals or the more specific requisitioning of his personal blood. Well, he'd have to persevere through. Mr. *Keep it from Grindelwald by saying it in German.*

It really was simple compared to some Draco had done. That didn't keep Harry from giving Draco an admiring look as Draco took the book along with the lead in the situation. "I can't believe," he whispered in Draco's ear, "I finally get to see one of your famous rituals," and Draco suddenly wished it involved far more impressive magic.

"The moonstones do all the work," Draco admitted reluctantly. "Alright, let's do this. Madam Hooch's blown the whistle, time to fly. Gilderoy?" Gilderoy held out his arm, and looked relieved when Draco cut directly at his palm rather than up at his offered wrist. Severus had indeed done a good job clearing the scars, at least this far up the arm, and Draco resolved this ritual would leave no more- well, on the skin, at least...

"What a beautiful dagger," Grindelwald commented, from his perch on the base of the Hallows basin at a safe distance. "It does look mightily familiar. Lamia Periander..."

"No one gets to yap until the ritual's done," Draco said playfully, "You're ruining the gravitas," and Grindelwald laughed and held up his hands.

"Far be it from me to interfere with the workings of a fellow dark lord."

Harry seemed not to want to think about that too much. He helped Draco lead Gilderoy about in a circle, letting the blood drip down to mark roughly the far points of an X through the millunas. Draco gathered more blood in a vial before letting go and healing Gilderoy's palm with Severus's song spell, though he felt a hurriedness in some sense to impress his audience. He just hoped Dobby wasn't poking a head in to witness his substandard dramatics.

"Blood of the lord of hell," Draco intoned, "Freely given," and knelt uncomfortably on top of other stones. He carefully upended the vial over the trio of what seemed the most central millunas. It ran loosely, a lovely dark crimson in truth over the luminous smooth surface, until Draco recited the operative part with his best pronunciation: "Gilderoy Lockhart, el Senyor de L'Inframon, sang escalpada per les seves venes."

The three stones all at once shattered.

They let out a hissing black smoke as they broke, much in truth like the smaller quantity of moonstones used in the memory by Dantanian, for the small matter of pulling the moon down from the sky and turning a human boy to a Dementor. That memory clouded the excitement of prospective success, as if by resorting to these ends, Draco was nearing the resemblance to Dantanian within rather than without that dogged him still- but what the stones became, there, that was different. They cracked like eggs, and where Draco had expected them to

become dust, whether sparkling or foul no more than the consistency of ashes, they became blood.

Blood, the same healthy dark red as Gilderoy's, spilled from the stones, and over Draco's fingertips before he could remove them. He took that as perhaps necessary cross-contamination, but shifted backwards still, sliding as quickly as he dared over the assembled millunas like unlaid cobblestones. Draco looked up, and even from across the room, Draco could see Grindelwald mouthing, 'Lord of hell?' incredulously over at him, with a jerk of his head towards Gilderoy. Draco gave him a warning look, though thankfully he'd remained silent. Harry, for his part, was watching with more than enough healthy reverence, standing beside Grindelwald as a silent guard to keep him in line.

"Blood of the lord's friend, freely given," Draco recited, and Harry was the one to break the eerie silence with a gasp. Maybe Draco should have warned him it would involve Draco's blood as well, with Harry's damned protectiveness likely driving him half-mad, to witness Draco cut open his own palm. He began to drip his tainted blood of House Black all around the ring of moonstones around the center, while the foyer echoed with the sound of Harry's aborted cry, and then his harsh breathing to control himself.

"Draco Black, L'amic de L'Inframon, sang escalpada per les seves venes," Draco recited, and it took everything in him still not to jerk back as the stones seemed to implode rather than explode this time, turning so rapidly to hissing red blood, it was like they'd dissolved. All those thousands of nights worth of moonlight concentrated in each milluna, and now they were nothing but the reflection of the blood still dripping from Draco's palm, which he had yet to heal.

He healed it, and didn't manage to slide away without getting more blood on his hands, and this time his knees. The blood was pooling from the cracked empty shell of each stone and running in thick rivulets between them, joining each other to form puddles and then one great flow of blood seeping from the center outwards. Draco had the instinct that he didn't want to let it reach the edges before they were complete. Even if Harry was shaken by what he had witnessed.

When Draco looked away from himself, Grindelwald was watching not the ritual now but Harry, with a canniness in his eyes like he thought he understood everything between Harry and Draco. And damn him, with the things *he* knew about Draco, he likely did, better than Harry himself.

So Draco didn't bother to hide the tenderness in his voice as he beckoned Harry over, and reached over with blood-slippery hands to brace Harry where he could reach him. Draco skipped the English and pushed forward with more urgency. "Harry Potter. El mag amb al poder com L'Inframon, sang escalpada per les seves venes, la tercera i més forta sang," Draco recited. Harry obediently let Draco guide him by the wrist to drip over the next ring, the final one.

This time, the stones seemed to go up in smoke, an instant contraction from beautiful and luminous to joining the dark hissing morass already sliding in ribbons of red beneath them, joining the pool so quickly Draco shoved Harry back, out and away from the circle. Draco

followed as quickly as he could, but he was still drenched in blood up to his knees, so much his robes and trousers were sodden and heavy with it.

Only a step worth of time after, and there was enough filthy blackness rising into the air from the pool of red, it resembled nothing so much as a pit of great dark snakes writhing in the air, trying to breathe before being sucked under to drown in blood. So, a cheery sight. Something in its mixture of blood and smoke reminded Draco of the snakes that Dantanian had killed with Dracosanguis, a spell neither Draco nor Phineas fucking Black had ever been able to cast- well, not yet...

"Gilderoy!" Draco barked, and say this for the man, he must have had more than any lifetime's fair share of blood rituals, to leave off his gawping and advance to Draco's blood-weighted side and kneel unhesitatingly beside him.

Gilderoy squared his shoulders, tossed back his unruly gold hair, and recited in far better Catalan, "Aigua de l'estany, possessio del senyor, flux! Estany infernal, estany de L'Inframon, estany de L'Infern, flux! Flux! *Flux!*"

Gilderoy's voice echoed like a thunderbolt on his last cry of *Flux.* Yes, definitely one well-trained in the ceremony of blood rituals, that one, unfortunately for his sake. But this one was at least to demand no more of his blood, only the vial of water that he had carefully upended into the pool of blood.

Even Grindelwald let out a sound of pure astonishment as the black and red and brown and muck left the pit of reptilian brimstone and purity began to assert itself, of all things, an icy and unforgiving purity. Draco could feel the coldness of the water near him, radiating out its forbidding frozen glow near enough to his hand to threaten its own freezing. But it did not threaten to leave its circumscribed circle, because as the blood turned to water, it sunk. The stone itself creaked and gave way as the unnatural weight of the hellwater overwhelmed the aged stones of the fortress and made its own smallest of lakes, the clarity of the water soon asserting itself, until it mirrored the spiral staircase above it as perfectly as a mirror. Draco's one fear was that it would too quickly somehow freeze.

"Yes," Draco hissed, "Yes!" and leaped up, casting Aguamenti over himself to wash the blood off. Grindelwald advanced a mere step forward. He seemed to almost shiver in fascination as the red of the drying blood upset the surface of the water, then was taken in without leaving any of its redness apparent, the unimpeachable bleakness of the pond remaining itself. "Don't touch it," he whispered as quietly as he could to Harry, and then turned to the victim of this ritual and gave his most charming smile. "There we go, my lord. Just hop right in and we'll be off in a jiffy. There it is, your way out of Nurmengard!"

When Grindelwald didn't move, Draco feared his flippant attempt at lightness had been too idiomatic. "All we need is for you to get into that water and submerge yourself completely, and that's your way to freedom."

"By my death?" Grindelwald exclaimed, drawing back in what looked real affront. "Quite a show, Kaktusblüte, but do not think I have forgotten the name you gave this new body of water you have chosen to place so inconveniently in Nurmengard for posterity. Why in the

name of Merlin would I ever consent to enter a body of water called a Höllenpfütze? *Höllen*?"

"It's just a pithy nickname," Draco coaxed, coming over with hands raised in placation. "Just a funny way to say it. It doesn't mean *death,* I didn't think you had such a literal mind. The only thing dying will be the connection between you and Nurmengard."

"And what does this water do?" Grindelwald asked icily. He'd drawn himself back behind his furs against the furthest wall with the airs of a king in exile. "Break the wards on me, you say. How? How does it accomplish this?"

"It won't hurt you, it's perfectly safe," Draco promised, and Grindelwald looked at him sideways.

"That's why you told your lover not to touch it," Grindelwald said curtly, with far better hearing than one would expect for a wizard of his years. "Have him touch it, then, if it is so *safe.*"

"Don't," Draco snapped over at Harry instinctively, only to wince at Grindelwald's grim smile of confidence. "We don't have time for your games, Grindelwald. We're here to help you. Do you think we would have gone through all this trouble and used so many stones that precious just to hurt you? Because I can *demonstrate* my ability to hurt you creatively, no puddle needed, should you continue to *delay proceedings.*"

"Torture me all you like," Grindelwald said firmly, "I will not get into that water."

"Imperio!" Draco cast in a fit of rage, still squishing blood and water out of his shoes. He had no more luck at overpowering Grindelwald and controlling him, though, than he had found at Occlumency against him. "Fine, then, fine! Let's just cast Petrificus totalus and dump him in, he can protest all he likes, he's one old man without a wand and we're-"

"The water is very cold," Gilderoy said, teeth chattering from sheer proximity to a pond which, if Draco's eyes didn't deceive him, did seem to have slightly expanded in diameter. "We'll be lucky if this doesn't kill a man of his age upon immersion, even with his cooperation. If he goes in petrified, I fear he'll simply drown. And even if we float him in and out..."

"We can't let a drop of it splash on *us*," Harry said anxiously.

"I'm content to wait here while you discuss my fate," Grindelwald called, "Although I am flattered, Kaktusblüte, that you've gone to such troubles to come up with such an *exotic* way to murder me."

"No one is murdering your stupid old arse!" Draco bellowed, frustration at this last unexpected obstacle making his composure desert him. "Fine, Grindelwald, you whiny old croaker! What will it take to get you into that pond?"

"One of you," Grindelwald said flatly, eyes not leaving Draco's, "Goes in first."

There was no guarantee that a ritual of that power hadn't already been detected, not by wards of Nurmengard's strength. There could be wizards of any number and strength coming to arrest them for their attempt to help this thick bugger, the long arm of the law rearing itself. Or, worse- the *Order of the Phoenix,* primed for *Death Eaters* to make the attempt. There was no bloody time-

"Gilderoy!" Draco barked. "Get in! Show him it won't fucking kill him!" Gilderoy hesitated, of course, knowing what it would do, and that the *temporary* nature of that magic loss was only something attested to in a very old book.

"Why do I have to-" Gilderoy began nervously, only for his eyes to dart about and go over Harry and Draco in reluctant understanding. He had to know that despite their ages, he'd be so much less useful in any fight, should Grindelwald prove difficult outside Nurmengard, once his magic- likely quickly- returned. "But-" He swallowed, and the memory from the Pensieve shot through Draco at once in an aching chill of sympathy, the sort he'd never used to feel for anyone in the blue loop but himself- he remembered Seguinus Sade playfully tormenting Gilderoy with the threat of the hellwater, and felt ill.

"I don't want to, please," Gilderoy gasped, and this was not exactly calculated to entice Grindelwald to cooperate.

"You'll go in together," Draco said decisively. "He'll help you in and out, to make sure you don't freeze or drown, isn't that nice? Remember, Gilderoy, complete immersion."

"Well, far be it from me to deny the embrace of a dashing young man," Grindelwald observed, without moving a muscle. Nor did Gilderoy, while Harry's gaze fell on all of them troubled. He looked as if he might intervene in his do-gooder way on Gilderoy's behalf any second.

"Gilderoy, I need you to do this," Draco said, walking over and clasping Gilderoy's hands to his, and letting just a hint of his real desperation into his voice. "Please, I need this from you. *Please.* Can't you do this one thing for me, after everything I've done for you? I've risked so much to help you, Gilderoy. I've been your friend, your only friend. I've trusted you so much. Please don't betray my trust now."

It was a horrible thing to do, that way of calling in the debt, but call it in Draco did. And it worked, as Draco had known it would. "Yes," Gilderoy said with a fearful glint in his blue eyes, gone wide and haunted and slightly distance. "Yes, you're right. Yes, I'll do it." He walked over to Grindelwald and offered his hand. Grindelwald seemed surprised and a bit pleased by the texture of Gilderoy's palm in his. He wouldn't have expected it to be nearly as rough and worn as his own.

They went into the hellwater together, peacock and prisoner, in a tentative creep and then a single great fall. The water splashed into the air, but mostly vertically, and nowhere near Harry and Draco, who had retreated into the threshold of the entrance hall. The two light heads went under together, and thankfully, it was only a few seconds before they both surfaced, Grindelwald gasping for breath and shivering, and Gilderoy struggling to get his hair back in order.

Draco reached into his pocket and withdrew the amber warming pendant he'd bought in Berlin, handing it over to Gilderoy while carefully not even touching the man. He'd meant to give it to Grindelwald, and maybe the aged man needed it more, but he felt guilty enough about Gilderoy already. "Here, this will help," Draco said, and Gilderoy gave him a tired but untainted smile, turning his back and leaving the freezing pool behind them.

"How will we know if it's worked?" Harry asked, going over to Grindelwald's side as if the sundering of the bond would be somehow visible. Perhaps it would be palpable to Grindelwald, though. They all peered at Grindelwald, who let out a strangled cry.

"I can't feel it. I can't. The anchor. The weight of Nurmengard, the cursed bond- it's gone! After all these years, it's gone, it's not tied to my magic- my *magic*- I can't feel my magic either! Scheisse! Black, what have you done to me?"

"What I promised," Draco said, bracing himself for a thunderstorm of a reaction. What could Grindelwald do now to retaliate against them, anyway? *Try and give one of us a great big hug with his hellwater-covered furs, for starters.* "I did what hundreds couldn't. It's like you said. I must truly be a spectacular dark wizard-"

"YOU STOLE MY MAGIC!" Grindelwald bellowed, and made an unsteady lunge in Draco's direction. In that moment, there was no more gravitas or composure to him than Marietta Edgecombe, afflicted for the first time with Langlock. "Give it back! GIVE IT BACK!"

"It will come back," Gilderoy said hurriedly, raising his hands and inserting himself between them. "I wouldn't have gone in if it wouldn't. Please, we'll just have to wait. In the meantime, let's get out of Nurmengard. Don't you want to see some other place before you die?"

"Not without my magic!"

"He's telling the truth, it will come back," Draco coaxed. "Now, aren't you interested in *how* I've done that? Admit it, aren't you a *little* curious?" Grindelwald, incredibly, seemed to calm a bit at this angle to proceedings, tilting his head and eyeing Draco more analytically. "See, I knew it, you want to know. You want to know what that ritual was, how I managed it-"

"The secrets of Xaphan, clearly," Grindelwald scoffed, but seemed rapidly less hysterical. "How long until it returns? Whether or not I can use it at the moment, the feeling of its absence- you can't know-"

It did take a few more minutes of sweet-talking Grindelwald and both him and Gilderoy drying for things to get back in order. But with the promise of an explanation, along with warm clothes, warm food, and a warm bed where they were going, they had Grindelwald walking alongside them underneath the open roof of the entrance hall, marveling at its disrepair. "Goodbye, old bones," Grindelwald intoned to the broken stone. "Goodbye, my first and only castle."

You might be surprised.

"With its manifesto at the front," Draco teased, refusing to let there be any heaviness. If Grindelwald was someone of sentimental attachment for him, this would have been an

objectively weighty and moving moment, the release after so many wasted decades from the same prison. As it was, the Prisoner of Nurmengard walked out of his internment without a flourish or flare, only ordinary footsteps, the anchor that had tied him to it so long merely a memory.

"See, there it is," Draco said with a laugh, turning to gesture at the sign atop the rotting entrance. "For the Greater Good-"

"Accio dagger!"

Draco knew that voice. It didn't mean a damn thing whether or not he did, of course, when the just-used ritual dagger was flying out of his pocket, and into the hands of-

"Draco!" Gilderoy exclaimed, as he was seized from their side.

A knife was put to his throat by the slender, pretty, pale hand of Theodore Nott.

"Theo?" Draco gasped, at the same time as Harry gasped, "Nott," Grindelwald went, "Who is this," and Theo said, "Hello, Grindelwald."

"Hello," both Draco and Grindelwald echoed automatically, then looked at each other with a start. Theo let out his distinctive, lovely laugh.

"Oh, that's right. I suppose that is redundant here." He tilted his sandy blond head in gentle humor. "Hello, actual Gellert Grindelwald. Did Draco ever tell you that was his nickname on our Quidditch team? Grindelwald."

"Kaktusblüte, we haven't been introduced," Grindelwald said, remarkably calmly. "Do recommend me to your charming friend here with the knife."

"Let Lockhart go," Harry said, stepping forward, and Theo scoffed at the sight of him, pleasant facade short-lived.

"I knew you would come. I was sure of it," Theo said enigmatically, eyes on Harry full of hate. "You can't ever leave him alone, can you? Not really. And so here you are. I suppose it is convenient." He seized Gilderoy by the side, dragging him closer to him and positioning the knife higher on his neck, right at the jugular. After a moment, finding the warming pendant hot, he took it off an indignant Gilderoy's neck and threw it aside. "No, I'm keeping hold of Professor Lockhart. I'm sorry for the imposition, sir, but really, I have to say, you were the worst Defense professor we ever had. Sonorus," he cast on himself, to be sure his voice could be heard over the wind, and there went the hope that touching Gilderoy would nullify his magic. It seemed just fine, from the way it boomed then over the great ruined fortress.

"Incendio! Incendio! Incendio!" Theo didn't bother not to recite the name of the spell. It boomed out too instead, a cataclysmic tremor, as he cast it three times, once for each of the three brooms they'd brought, behind them still in the castle. All three went up in dramatic flames, heat at their back.

"What are you doing, Theo?" Draco said in a terrible hollow voice, and barked, "Stop!" in the same empty growl to Harry, when he saw Harry taking out his wand. "Don't provoke him, he has Gilderoy. Theo, what do you think you're doing?" Except Draco already knew.

The alpine wind whipped keenly over them all, making a still-damp Grindelwald shiver and stumble against Harry. The sun illuminated Theo's light hair from behind, and showed off his deep blue eyes to perfection. Never must anyone have looked more like an ancient painting as they held a man at knifepoint. Theo was dressed almost exactly as Harry and Draco were, though- in the ordinary everyday robes of a Hogwarts student, except his tie and badge were, of course, green, as Draco's had been once...

"What does it look like?" Theo said lightly. "Come on, Grindelwald, don't ask stupid questions." The real Grindelwald let out a soft noise of affront. "Sorry." Theo's voice went wry. "I do have to try and break that habit."

"Theo," Draco said, stepping forward even as his awkward legs felt they would shake and give way under him, at the immensity of what he'd missed, of this mistake. *If Dobby saw him, he must already have gone...* "Theo, whatever you want, we can talk about this, like civilized people-"

"Not at all ashamed to be caught absconding with the Prisoner of Nurmengard?" Theo asked drolly, attention fixed solely on Draco then, in that serious, intent quiet way that at times could belong to Draco alone. That was the most awful thing. There was no horns grown on his head, no maniacal laughter, no demonic creatures at his beck and call. It was just Theodore Nott, Kingsnakes Chaser, who had been attacked by one of Draco's peacocks when they were children.

"Then, I suppose you don't feel shame for very much. And of course you've succeeded at it. Good job, Draco. I really expected no less, from you."

"Draco," Gilderoy gasped, looking around frantically, as if hoping invisible hands would come out of nowhere and extract him from the confident grasp of his former student.

"What, mad we beat you to it?" Draco hissed, a deep, bilious rage stirring in his insides. "If you want Grindelwald, you can't have him-"

"Stupid sometimes, though, for a 'Ravenclaw'," Theo said calmly. "This isn't just by chance, Draco. I'm not here for the prisoner. I'm here for you."

"If you want to kill me, that's not exactly news," Draco bit out, words from the Black Dagger flitting through his head with the new voice of deadly fatality. "But I congratulate you on the novelty of setting. Just let Gilderoy go, and then-"

"You could," Theo said softly, "Only be so lucky. And no, I won't let your pet go. I'm holding him hostage so you don't take this chance to slice me open the same way you killed my father."

"What are you *doing*, then?" Draco asked for what felt the first and hundredth time, never having felt so impotent and hopeless in his life, and Theo shrugged elegantly.

"Mainly," Theo said, "Stalling. Finite incantatem," he cast on his Sonorus charm. "Ah, here she is," and smiled to himself, a genuine closed-lipped smile, as a dark-robed figure with wild dark hair dropped from the ramparts of the castle to stride up eagerly to his side. He kept hold of Gilderoy and the knife with one hand, and used the other to pull close and press a kiss to the lips of Bellatrix Lestrange.

It was an indescribably awful sight, like anyone who witnessed it would never be clean again. Bellatrix was a fair-faced, dark-eyed demon seizing upon Theo and kissing him viciously, with all of the feeling a woman like her could have had in her. Her lips and tongue and teeth were all at once involved in this savage show of greeting, as Theo returned the kiss with equal enthusiasm, seeming to delight in the showiness of it. It was a hungry kiss. It also looked, already, a triumphant one.

Harry darted forward faster than Draco could track and a jolt of red light shot from his wand- Stupefy, Draco recognized, and clearly, Theo could recognize it too, from how he pulled Gilderoy into its way, just in time to intercept it, without letting his mouth leave Draco's aunt's for a second. Gilderoy crumpled into Theo's arms, and the kiss reluctantly parted, with humor on both of their faces, like an old married couple who'd just been questioned on a subject exceedingly obvious to both.

"I would stop that, if I were you," Bellatrix laughed, "If you don't want to lose your little pet pretender," and dragged her long sharp nail down the cheek of Gilderoy. The scratch blossomed a bright scarlet with blood, which it seemed everyone was letting from Gilderoy today. "That's right, you're going to behave now, aren't you, poppet?"

She leered at Harry, gave Draco at his side a more hateful look, and then her gaze fastened on Grindelwald, who had contrived to conceal himself behind Harry as much as possible, before Harry had bolted. "And you must be Grindelwald. I have to say, I expected more. Are you ready to fight with your new friends? You're not the sort of man to choose the losing side. Join us and we-"

"Apologies, my love," Theo interjected, "But his magic has been taken. The ritual Draco did to get him out of Nurmengard," and she let out a shrill, bone-chilling laugh.

"No wonder, then," she said with a queer smile, "He cowers like a little worm. And what is this?" she squealed, as Draco placed himself in the way between her and Grindelwald. "What value has his life to you, hmm? Well, we'll have all our answers soon enough, my love." She turned back to Theo with a bright light in her nasty dark eyes. "Bring them."

Draco hated the sound of that, and kept his wand out and pointed in their direction. But with them still holding Gilderoy, there was nothing else he could do.

Theo handed Gilderoy over completely to Bellatrix, and the dagger with her. Draco's insides clenched even worse at the sight of his dagger in *those* hands, especially after she gave it an impressed, satisfied look that said, *This is mine now.* And turned it so the flat of the blade faced her, and gave it a long, appreciative *lick.*

While Theo rolled up the sleeve of his Hogwarts robe to reveal the Dark Mark beneath.

He turned to give Draco a small, lovely smile first. "I will accept no restitution," he said, "But your life," and pressed down.

It was the familiar gesture used to call the Dark Lord's followers. Then there were the pops of Apparition all around him, face after face emerging into the blistering wind, familiar and each more terrible. The Carrows. Uncle Rodolphus, who might have a bit more than evildoing to worry about these days. Fenrir Greyback...

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.

Narcissa was on Lucius's arm. Against her rested a familiar-looking silver hand on Lucius's wrist.

"Take the old man and the Potter boy alive," Bellatrix ordered the Death Eaters. "The Malfoy boy, I will kill myself."

The Battle of Nurmengard

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! It's totally ok to print out copies of this for yourselves if you like! :)

Playlist

"Professor Snape?"

Dobby appeared with Draco's godfather, in between the Death Eaters and their intended victim, and the newest and prettiest Death Eater let out his Head of House's name with utter shock. The appearance of Karkaroff at Dobby's other side, long missing and marked for death, seemed barely an afterthought for him or for those behind him. "Severus," Bellatrix breathed out, with hatred and wariness, while Theo stiffened like he had been caught cheating on a Defense essay.

Whatever this little Death Eater sightseeing soiree was, it was clearly taking place without the intended knowledge of one Severus Snape. As evidenced by the gobsmacked look on Severus's face, who clearly had no warning as to the preposterous arrangement of so many of his supposed allies from either side, at the most unlikely place on Earth. The same ignorance, of course, could almost certainly not have been said for, say, Voldemort. The Dark Lord must have kept his supposed favorite Severus in the dark.

Dobby ran from the Death Eaters to Harry and Draco's side, to whisper for Draco and Harry's ears only. "Dobby is bringing everyone who is at Xaphan!" A cowering Grindelwald behind Harry heard as well. Draco registered the intrigued smirk on Grindelwald's face, before he turned back towards his godfather, who was situated right in the line of fire.

"Theo?" Severus called in shock, over the murmurs and cries of his fellow Death Eaters. That precluded any doubt Draco might have had as to lies on his godfather's part. The most unbelievable thing of all, in this scene Severus had been Apparated into in media res, seemed to be the presence of one of his Slytherins in the midst of the combatants. Severus's eyes went with baffled incomprehension, for everyone to see, to Theo's exposed arm, the sleeve still rolled up showing off the Dark Mark.

Theo pulled down his sleeve, posture turning defensive, much as his voice tried and failed not to be. "You're not always the authority you presume yourself to be, Professor."

"The Dark Lord," Bellatrix said through gritted teeth, "Has seen fit not to appraise you of certain secret matters, given the questionability of your *loyalty.* Which seems to have been

fitting of his great wisdom. Severus, you were *not meant to be here*!"

"And yet I am," Severus growled, "And *what is this*?" His gaze seemed to alight for just a moment, with a trace of outrage he could not quite hide, on the knife Bellatrix held to an unconscious Gilderoy's neck.

"Your foremost Slytherin, Theodore Nott," Bellatrix proclaimed, with an awful note of pride in her voice, "Discovered the intention of *your godson* to free the Prisoner of Nurmengard! We loyal Death Eaters, on the command of the Dark Lord, have seized the opportunity to strike a crushing blow at his meddling, and at his disgusting lover Potter! So I ask again, Severus, *what are you doing here*?"

"I've come as well! Karkaroff! I've returned from the dead!" Karkaroff proclaimed, seeing his moment, and everyone up to and including Dobby ignored him.

Only Grindelwald seemed concerned by his presence, a foreign one to him despite their meeting many years ago. He prodded at Draco's back in curiosity, as if this was no more than some light fare at the cinema, in a series he had dropped in on mid-run. "Who is that?" he whispered, but a transfixed Draco ignored him.

Severus's gaze darted before and then behind himself, still uncharacteristically at a loss. When he made out the presence of Grindelwald behind Harry's back, most decidedly *outside* the famous welcoming inscription over Nurmengard, he scarcely seemed able to add that into his calculations. So hazardous already was the current inconceivable arrangement of players and dangers on the board.

Briefly, as an observation not immediately pressing, but inherently alarming, it went through Draco's head and left it: if Dobby had brought *everyone* at Xaphan, where had Hermione and everyone been?

Bellatrix's impatience was justified, in the sense that *with* any sense, Draco would have been taking the chance to edge away behind Severus and Karkaroff and back into Nurmengard. But as long as she still had Gilderoy in her grasp, that wasn't going to happen. She ruined her own quite penetrating questions, as well as a bit of leverage, by hopping from interrogating Severus to a brusque "Enervate!" at Gilderoy of all people. The stunned wizard in her arms blinked back to reality, gaze going from his captor to the glimmering dagger at his throat, so recently at his own hand- *I could try and summon it back, but what if it slashes Gilderoy's throat on the way*- and alighted inevitably on the paralyzed figure of Severus. He stared at Severus helplessly, with those eyes Severus had called- what was it? *So preposterously blue?*

"Take the wands of Potter and Malfoy," she ordered Severus. "If they resist, they know I will slit their pet peacock's throat. As will I if you do. None of them are leaving here to tell Dumbledore whose side you are truly on. If your loyalties truly lie with us, show it today!"

"So this is the godfather," Grindelwald observed softly, and Draco shot him a death glare every bit as vehement as the one he had been leveling impotently at Aunt Bella. It also helped him avoid meeting his mother's eyes.

"The Dark Lord has placed you in command here?" Severus asked tersely, and Bellatrix gave a smug nod. "As you wish," he hissed, and stalked towards Harry and Draco.

Draco didn't know why he was so shocked that Severus actually did it. Harry certainly looked betrayed enough to make all the Death Eaters cackle, save the forgotten Karkaroff to the side, simmering at the sight of his hated enemy back in the fold.

Severus took that famous phoenix feather-core wand from Harry without a second of hesitation, only to pull up when it came to Draco. "I have no interest," he called grimly towards Bellatrix, "In acquiring one of those brands to match the boy's parents."

"You evil traitor," Harry spat at Severus, and Draco had no idea whether he was acting. For Draco's part, this shook none of his faith in Severus's loyalties. In the current situation, there was nothing else Severus *could* do.

To think Draco, and even Severus, had been so thoroughly checkmated- by Theodore Nott...

"Not if he lets it go willingly," Bellatrix said with satisfaction. "Dantanian, you have more sense than that, don't you, sweetheart? Unless he wants to see *this* artery severed-"

Gilderoy let out a heart-rending little whimper of fear he seemed to be trying to conquer, then, incredibly, did choose despite his earlier protestations to play the Gryffindor. "It's alright, Draco!" Gilderoy yelled over. "Don't give it to him! Not for me! It's alright! I always expected to die of bleeding from the throat!"

Severus ignored Gilderoy as if he hadn't spoken. As did Draco. "Here," Draco said, fishing out the talon wand and throwing it forward, only just out of his own reach. Severus made a show of knocking it with his foot, without really putting it much further from Draco. He was unharmed, before turning back to the Death Eaters and returning to Bellatrix's side.

"Now, Severus," Bellatrix ordered, well-pleased. "If you truly wish to prove your loyalty, prove your cruelty!"

Oh, how much Draco did *not* miss the time training to be a Death Eater under that woman.

"Cast Cruciatus on Lockhart! Show these worthless scum our lord's power!"

She shifted back the knife to toss Lockhart at Severus's feet, unceremoniously launching him and ending in a pained cry. Lockhart landed in an undignified heap there, hand once freed at the neck gone instinctively to his wand pocket, but then it slumped out of it dejectedly, seemingly remembering his immersion in the hellwater. So he had no choice but to sit there and wait to see whether he would be tortured by the man he loved. How circular the world could become.

But not in this. Where Severus had played his role with Harry and Draco, performance failed when it came to Gilderoy. No curses were forthcoming out of those tense thin lips. Maybe that surprised Harry, and certainly Dobby, who made an astonished sound down at Draco's side. But Draco understood. He understood with an awful certainty, that Severus was simply

not capable of hurting Gilderoy, and that it may be Draco's godfather too added to the list of people Draco's own folly could lose him.

"Give me both wands, Professor," Theo ordered with a sudden start of doubt, stepping up, "Give me Potter and Draco's wands," but Bellatrix and Severus ignored the teenager, in favor of that ever-compelling prospect of *to torture or not to torture*.

Gilderoy didn't seem to know what to do, waiting for the curse to descend, only to peer up at Severus in confusion when he was left unhurt. He'd pulled his dirty Ravenclaw-blue furs tighter around himself with white-knuckled hands steeled against the pain, as if that could protect him. Now his grip loosened, face falling open and unguarded at the sight of Severus staring down at him. Both men looked surprised, neither in truth seeming to expect Severus's clemency. Severus, it seemed, simply could *not*, even if Gilderoy would likely have wanted him to, if he understood what was in stake in that horribly selfish act of mercy-

Except, wait, Gilderoy was in *Severus's* grasp, not Bellatrix. The drying blood felt as if it had glued Draco's legs to the ground unmoving, but actually, they were no longer practically trapped by the hostage-taking. If Severus could just get himself and Gilderoy over to their side and they could get out of here, just Apparate away with them all unscathed and-

Karkaroff was there, Karkaroff who Draco after a moment had forgotten too, Karkaroff who it seemed was unwilling to ever again let himself be forgotten.

"He's a traitor!" Karkaroff exclaimed, running over and throwing himself at the feet of Father. Karkaroff must have regarded him as the real power there, even if he should have heard that the one put in charge today, the one still in favor, was Bellatrix. "He's a traitor, you see! He's on their side! I am not! I am loyal to you, Lucius! I am loyal to our great Dark Lord, I never lost the faith, I have been waiting for his return, I will prove it you-"

"Silence," Father said coldly, looking merely irritated at the distraction from the show at hand. Draco had the small satisfaction then of watching their newest defector be backhanded across the face, by a silver hand that packed far worse a blow than Father's hand ever had before. Except perhaps when wielding a walking stick.

"He is on their side!" Karkaroff bellowed, perhaps fearing for his life once the Death Eaters he had spent months fleeing got around to acknowledging his existence, or maybe just that determined to take his chance and get the vision he saw in the Mirror of Erised realized: Severus Snape suffering.

"Igor," Mother said, with a gentle tone that could pass as kindness from her, "Quiet, we all *know* Severus is a spy for both sides-"

"But his true loyalties are with them! With his *godson*! I've been with them, you know! They've been protecting me from you! Draco Malfoy, he's let me in to Xaphan, he had me help them get to Nurmengard- at Xaphan, where the Order is building their base, and Snape is always there! At Xaphan!" Karkaroff seemed inordinately proud of himself just to know the word *Xaphan*. He got to his feet and stumbled forward towards Bellatrix, belatedly understanding the true power balance. "He's helping rebuild their citadel, he's always with this blond vampire-whore-"

"Hold your tongue, Karkaroff," Severus hissed, and this seemed to spur Karkaroff on like nothing else.

"You see! Ha!" Karkaroff exclaimed, tottering until he could jab an accusing finger right into Severus's chest. Severus jerked away to avoid the touch as he would have any madman's, which Karkaroff in truth had come to resemble. Just over his time with Draco, the stringy overgrown hair around Karkaroff's face seemed to have turned grayer and wilder. Karkaroff's unshaven face was contorted into a hideous caricature of his usual merely grumpy and contemptuous self, alive as he had never seemed with a hatred greater than anyone could have known- but Draco *should* have known, should have known protection would have done nothing to win the loyalty of a man whose sole drive in his remaining life did not seem in truth survival, but revenge-

"All you say," Bellatrix said skeptically, "He might have done in the service of preserving his cover. You are the one we *know* turned from our side, who revealed poor Barty and damned him to Azkaban..."

Draco edged ever so closer to the talon wand where it sat on the ground. Only Theo seemed to notice. "Professor Snape," Theo said, "Give me Potter's wand," and didn't even seem to be heard.

"You see how Snape defends Lockhart!" Karkaroff crowed. "You see how he will not torture him! I will torture him if you like! I will *kill* anyone you like! Can Snape say the same? Could he torture his godson? If you ordered him to kill him, would he?"

"The Malfoy boy is mine, to take my vengeance," Bellatrix spat, but she looked less certain. Draco inched another step. Again, only Theo seemed to notice, and inched a wary step of his own towards the talon wand. Then he withdrew his own wand, and levitated the talon wand into the air towards himself- slowly, as if not wanting to be insubordinate by disturbing Bellatrix's conversation.

"Severus Snape is a traitor to us," Karkaroff shrieked, "Not me, never me, and he must die!"

"Wait, Karkaroff," Bellatrix tried to say.

"I have waited so many years to do this," Karkaroff seethed, before his face was lit with a brilliant, obscene smile. "And to think I get to do it in front of you, *Frankenstein*, you murderous little brat! Oh, that you will watch as *I* take your *godfather* from you- this is for what you did to *Pammaque*! Pammaque Periander! Avad-"

Theo leaned forward and jerked his wand to bring the talon wand the rest of the way to him, reaching out as if for the Quaffle, but it was too late. Draco leaped forward like a Seeker to a Snitch, reflexes still there, and seized the wand out of the air right in Theo's face. Theo stumbled and fell onto his hands and knees.

"Cauterizo!" Draco screamed, but the pain that erupted in Karkaroff's hand did nothing but restart the awful, final, unshieldable syllables from that hateful visage- there was no uncertainty what he meant as with Nott, this was a face that would never stop until Draco's godfather was dead, as long as he lived-

Karkaroff pointed his wand right at Severus and hissed, "Avada Ke-"

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Green light shot from Draco's wand for a third time in his life, out from nearly point blank range, past Theo's shoulder into Igor Karkaroff, who was flung high enough into the air to block the sun for a moment, before he crashed down dead at the feet of Bellatrix Lestrange. Bellatrix shrieked and jumped back from the body, falling against her sister and screaming out Draco's name. Theo's brilliant deep blue eyes went huge in horror as the body crashed by him as well, staring mutely at the sight of a man killed, by the same man who had killed his father.

Severus rounded on Draco and lunged at him, seizing him by the arm as if fearing he would let out another Killing Curse from it. "You promised me you would never use the Killing Curse again!" he bellowed, self-preservation overwhelmed for that single moment in devastation at what he had just watched his godson do. "What have you done, Draco?" he cried out wretchedly. "You promised me. You promised me! What have you done?"

"We have to *run*!" Draco screamed, and then, where they had all been paralyzed, everything seemed to happen all at once.

"Confringo!" Bellatrix yelled in pure rage, seeming to think anyone on the other side good enough prey to be blown to blood and bone. The curse exploded just in front of them as Draco seized Gilderoy from Severus's feet and tried to drag him backwards. Severus cast Nebulus, joining with the smoke and debris thrown into the air from the stony mountainside to turn the world ashen charcoal-grey. It threw the immediate stream of exploding rock from him, Draco, and Gilderoy to behind them. Dobby lifted a hand and snapped his trembling fingers and shield came into being just in time to protect himself, Harry, and Grindelwald. Then Father cast some curse that flew past Draco's face in the smoke. Draco would never know what it had been.

Draco cast Fumos as Severus took Gilderoy's arm and the two of them ran together. They were stopped for a moment as Draco caught up, which Draco couldn't understand until he saw Severus putting Harry's wand back in his hand. Curses flew through the smoggy air at them, but it was easy to dodge them by hitting the ground and inching backwards towards Nurmengard. The difficulty was Grindelwald, hardly able to duck up and down without Draco's assistance.

Draco was the one who had to make sure that the raison d'être for their whole fatal enterprise was not forgotten in the eruption of violence. He grabbed Grindelwald's robe, finding him in the fog they'd set which had blinded himself as well as their enemies, at the same time as someone on the other side cast Meteleojinx recanto, and another set a gust of wind to clear the smoke. New smoke rose in the air as Harry let out such a powerful gust of flame from Lacarnum inflamari, at least one or two figures looked as if they had been set alight.

Draco felt rather than saw as they reached the threshold of Nurmengard, passing under the words *For the greater good* without reading them still. "Wait, Severus!" Draco called, helping Grindelwald backwards as they tried to race to some place of safety, some higher

ground, even as they trapped themselves behind the anti-Apparition wards of Nurmengard. "The pool-"

"There's a pool, it blocks magic, I don't have my magic, Grindelwald doesn't," Gilderoy gasped out somewhere ahead of them to Severus.

The others were gaining distance on Draco and Grindelwald through the entrance hall, whose open roof made Draco surreally fear curses raining down on them, though the outbreaks of red and yes, green light seemed to be coming only from the front and from distance still as they tried to put out Harry's fire. Harry sent another gust of fire and just managed to miss Draco- but he'd caught the edge of Grindelwald's furs, and then Draco had to outright drag Grindelwald towards the others, into the foyer where the pond awaited.

"You caught him on fire, help me!" Draco screamed, no doubt a heartening sentence for their enemies if they overheard it. Grindelwald had the astonishing nimbleness to solve the problem for himself, once near a body of water, rolling himself to the side of the pool and plunging the edge of his furs and robes into the hellwater again. It let out a truly hellish singing sound and puff of uncanny smoke as it was immersed, but the active flames seemed to go out, even as the gleam of embers like coals seemed to linger right at Grindelwald's side.

"I'm sorry!" Harry called, "I'm sorry!" sounding frantic. Dobby snapped his fingers and made stones of the broken roof of the entrance hall cave in at the threshold to the foyer, falling on the wild dark-haired head of Bellatrix. Draco's dagger flew out savagely in response, and she was almost upon them. The dagger missed but she called it back with her magic, as Draco tried to help Grindelwald back up where he was panting and water-logged and smoking, trying to pull off the furs he had once cherished so dearly, ruined now.

"I'm sorry!" Harry called, and ran over and helped Draco drag Grindelwald to them, behind the pool where the others had stopped, waiting. Then he raced *back* towards the advancing figures of Bellatrix and Theo and yes, the brighter white-blond heads of Draco's parents, the image of suicidal Gryffindor heroism. "Lacarnum inflamari!" Harry screamed, and at first Draco thought Harry had missed somehow, even with the enemy right almost upon them now, only the hellwater between them. But when Harry's flame hit the pond instead and let up a great mass of tainted black smoke, Draco understood.

"Confringo!" Draco screamed, and finished the process Harry had begun of caving in the Höllenpfütze.

It missed Bellatrix and Theo, damn their luck, already far enough towards them to be at one side of the pond, Father and Mother on the other, but for those a step slower, they fell to the destruction of Nurmengard being torn apart. The combination of the fire and blasting sent the burning water and stone further, and from the looks of the conflagration and sinking that transfixed Draco for a stalled moment, the collapse in the floor was reaching the entrance hall, as onrushing Death Eaters plunged screeching face-first into the smoking hellwater.

It seemed their group had somehow managed to avoid getting drenched, at least fully, but then Severus shot out a blasting spell of his own, this one targeted, to throw water from the surface and splash out to fully immerse Father and Mother. Draco's heart fell into his stomach

as they both fell headlong into the pond, but he had to run- *it's just taking their magic, Mother won't be killed, it's just taking their magic so they can't hurt us-*

"Draco!" Harry screamed, as the power of Severus's blasting spell skimmed past Father and Mother and caught the side of the threshold, which caved in a great groaning of rock into the water. The rebounding splash soared out at all of them, and Harry shoved Draco and Grindelwald with him to the side just in time to avoid being fully soaked. Draco couldn't tell if the water caught Harry and took his magic from him, leaving him helpless. There was no way to see through the hissing brilliance of the silver-black water. A moment later, Grindelwald was the one stumbling to his feet and helping Draco up, dragging him to the right away from the floor which seemed in danger of completely caving in. A cutting curse sliced just where they had been, leaving further rock scored with the marks of the battle, and the vindictively exacting flash of the cut had Theodore Nott's name written on it. They hadn't stopped Theo from coming for them, if anything could stop him now.

Grindelwald pulled Draco towards the closest way out, which wasn't the staircase, where Draco could see Dobby leading all the others up in a frantic rush, but into darkness- the open hallway with its ramp-like series of hallways down. There was nowhere else for them two to go, though, with the water having cut them off from Harry. Draco could only hope Theo hadn't seen them scatter this way, and everyone would think their side had fled upstairs- except that was a cowardly thought, he should want the Death Eaters off the trail of his friends- but he had to protect a soaked half-burned magic-less Grindelwald who was inevitably panting for breath and slowing after so many years never leaving a single room, and now he had been thrown into a hellscape of his allies' own making. Draco cast Lumos, holding up his wand with his free hand to guide them, and they ran.

They rounded a second corner and Grindelwald's wet shoes skidded and nearly fell on the cobbled but smooth dark stone underfoot. Draco caught his arm just in time, and they both slid downwards further down the hall, like a deliberate slide down a staircase banister, and crashed into the wall at the end of the second hall. Draco hit stone and tasted blood, but he'd at least sheltered Grindelwald from the blow- except the contact between them set pain searing through him. Pain seemed natural from the fall into the wall, except this pain was different, pricking and sparking, this was the embers on Grindelwald's fur starting to catch against Draco's side-

Draco helped Grindelwald rip off the fur, leaving him in his soaked dark robes and more able to run without the water-logged weight, although still not much more. It left a marker behind of their fleeing this way, but it almost felt their feet would have already, with Grindelwald wet and such thick a coating everywhere of filthy, lung-clogging dirt and dust. Anyone in pursuit of them would be able to swiftly catch them, and Draco would have to defend both himself and Grindelwald in their escape, against however many came after them with their magic still intact.

His ears were still ringing from the crashing sound of stone into water and the hiss of fire and smoke, face stinging from pebbles of stone slapping into the air with the whip-hard wind from outside reaching into the castle more and more with the collapse, the bleeding from his mouth from the wall, but he couldn't focus on himself, he had to focus on getting out of here-

Except they had chosen a path with a dead end. Draco had *known* that, he'd explored this way with Dobby on his first visit. The realization sent him stumbling, although this time his fall was caught by the great purple vine he remembered, shaped like one huge organic tentacle snaking through this part of Nurmengard solely to ensnare them. Grindelwald's ankle slipped and seemed to nearly give way beneath him at the abrupt stop, as his feet crunched down on an abandoned skull. "No way," Draco gasped, "How, we can't go this way, Grindelwald, there's no way out," and then there was the sound of pursuing footsteps.

"They went this way!" a male voice called that Draco couldn't recognize in his panic, and they were perhaps finding the discarded fur.

"There's no way out! They'll catch us!" Draco hissed, furious at Grindelwald for having led them this way, towards death if they were too outnumbered- there was no telling, and if they ended up pinned at the dead end of that hideous horrible plant, more and more could come at him until he folded and Grindelwald would be taken and Draco slaughtered, unable to protect anyone- unless he left a trail of bodies and bodies- "Don't you remember your own fucking fortress-"

"I know!" Grindelwald cried out gleefully, and a brief glimpse over as Draco dragged the dark wizard down a steeper hall downwards confirmed what he should have already suspected- bodily discomfort notwithstanding, Grindelwald was *enjoying* this. "I KNOW!" he yelled, loud enough for their pursuers to be sure they were on the right track, and indeed there were answering cries. "I'm counting on it!"

"YOU MADMAN!" Draco screamed back, stopping where they stood ready to curse Grindelwald himself if this was what it came to. "Do *you* want me dead? Do you want to die?"

"Quiet! Listen! This is you! You can do this!" Grindelwald cried out joyously, waving his arms. Draco leaned against the plant, knowing the Death Eaters by their pounding footsteps crunching on bones underfoot only seconds away. He was thinking of the protection spell to cast- if Grindelwald was expecting Protego Diabolica out of him, this space was likely too small, and there wouldn't be enough time. Maybe it would be more fitting to just cast the Cruciatus on the second traitor here, who'd led him to a dark and nasty death with him. "Cast Serpensmorta!"

"You really want to die with snakes around your throat, be my guest," Draco growled, raising the talon wand, and the Death Eaters were in the closest hallway, feet pounding, pounding, pounding...

"Not on me, on the vine!" Grindelwald said excitedly.

"Serpensmorta!" Draco cast, obeying without thinking, and nothing happened whatsoever.

"You can! You can! My little dark lord! You can!" Grindelwald cried out in ecstatic, bloodthirsty confidence, "I cannot, you can, Kaktusblüte-"

Rounding the corner with their wands already raised were Crabbe, Goyle, Avery, Rookwood, Greyback-

"Serpensmorta!" Draco screamed, pointing his wand to the vine with no expectation of anything, and yet. And yet. The plant bloomed.

The vine came *alive,* the veins that throbbed right at its surface separating beneath Draco's gaze, soaring out to lunge at the Death Eaters. At the head of each tendril were snakes, hissing at the screaming men before wrapping their constricting bodies around their ankles and writhing upwards, extending the purple plant flesh in coils to ensnare them. Smaller bits like thick hairs stretched out to touch them curiously before the entire length would circle around like rope and squeeze.

A horrible stench filled the hall as black filth dripped out from the underside of the snakes, which fell onto the ground with an acid touch, and seemed to sear at the skin of the Death Eaters, who began to scream their heads off. "What is this?" Goyle exclaimed, panicked, while Greyback growled and vowed he'd have Draco's head for this, before a coil snuck around his neck and made any more speech impossible. His eyes rolled back in his head, bulging, tongue hanging out of his mouth.

The men were left pinned in a thicket of unliving snakes, acid dripping over their bodies where they touched, corroding through their robes and leaving them writhing in agony. Crabbe was uppermost along with Avery, piled on top of the others with the weight bearing down forcing more of the acid into Rookwood's skin, as they all howled as if under the Cruciatus. "This!" Grindelwald exclaimed, and strode right into the face of the trembling Avery and snatched the wand from his unresisting hand. "You dared pursue me? I? Gellert Grindelwald? In Nurmengard? THIS IS MY CASTLE!"

"Come on!" Draco cried, pulling his wand back from the plant, and Grindelwald did not follow. He took another wand, this from Crabbe, and stood with wands in both hands with a grin splitting his filthy, sweat-soaked, bloodied face from ear to ear, a single drop of black acid running down it unnoticed.

"Finish it first!" Grindelwald insisted, driving his aged fist into the spasming face of Fenrir Greyback with a pained gasp of satisfaction. "Finish it! Cast Serpensmorta again and kill them!"

"I am not," Draco hissed, "Going to murder anyone else today! Let alone any more of my *friends' parents*! Come with me now, you evil bastard, or be left behind!"

They made their slower, more cautious way back up the halls, the sight of the vine undulating along the stone filling Draco with stomach-churning revulsion. "You should have killed them, like you killed that man who tried to kill your godfather," Grindelwald panted. "You were right to, they could get loose and attack us from behind-"

"Worry about what's in front!" Draco screamed, and drew the attention of the knot of Death Eaters at the foot of the staircase, who were shooting curses up at Severus and Gilderoy. Rock had caved in above them, cutting off the exit of the staircase.

Theo was shooting a cutting curse that looked terrifyingly like Sectumsempra up at Draco's godfather and the defenseless Gilderoy, while Bellatrix blasted at their feet, cackling madly. By their side, Yarrow screamed Crucio like it was the only word in his vocabulary, and a

stumbling Severus just barely managed to get both him and Gilderoy out of its way. Then Theo was charging forward at the staircase with hatred in his deep blue eyes, ignoring Bellatrix's sharp call that they had Severus penned in. "I'll do it myself!" Theo screamed. "Take from him what he took from me!"

What drew attention the most, though, wasn't the Death Eaters immersed in a decidedly lopsided mass duel. It was the ones still pulling themselves out of what had gone from a Höllenpfütze to a true lake now at the entrance to Nurmengard. Helpless to intervene, deprived of magic, it must be a salutary bit of education for them all. They were trying to help one another from the water or just sitting there glumly, watching the proceedings with sullen interest. In the latter group were Draco's parents. Neither they nor the active Death Eaters noticed Draco and Grindelwald's arrival, though you would think the magic-less ones would at least have kept a lookout. But no, Draco could do anything without being noticed at first, anything- another Killing curse hung on his lips for the frantic figure of Bellatrix, throwing up a shield to protect Theo from the gust of flame sent out by Harry, who had been crouched behind Severus with blood pouring from his head-

Draco had the shot, but he had to disrupt them all, including Theo, now-

The Death Eaters liked to levitate people, throw them around? See how they liked the same done to them!

Grindelwald laughed and clapped his hands like a child at a country fair as the forms of the helpless Death Eaters soared one by one through the air into the fighting ones from behind, propelled like a series of heavy black-robed bullets.

"Yes!" Grindelwald called, "Get them," and it was always nice to have an appreciative audience. Especially for the humiliation of those who wanted to take those Draco loved away from him. In that moment, he might have killed them all if he could, if he didn't just need to get everyone out alive and unharmed-

"The woman!" Grindelwald prompted, when Theo remained standing at the front of the stairs, his own shield now straining against Harry's red light of Expelliarmus, while Bellatrix and the others crashed together down stunned in a great heap of evil like someone had scored a golazo, Bellatrix's face smashed by the flying impact of Father's new silver hand, and Mother remained standing, her new wand in hand though they all knew it was useless-

"No! Go!" Draco screamed, and Narcissa raised her other hand, trembling, and flung the moonstone dagger in their direction. Maybe she couldn't have thrown it harder, or maybe she could have, and it was only a token gesture of resistance. The dagger only flew halfway across the water before falling in with a soft splash and disappearing.

The red light of a Stunning spell came from Severus, felling Mother cleanly, and she fell. Not, though, as Draco's heart desperately feared, into the water. Just onto the stone, where she collapsed, slumped over herself with her bright blonde hair like a felled banner. The elf Stunning spell sent Theo's way by Dobby was less successful, as Theo hit the floor, crawling rapidly to the side out of the line of fire completely. Draco shot a spell in his direction that fell short, hitting someone in the heap of dazed Death Eater bodies, and Theo's gaze lifted in a panic of his own now, locking onto Draco's.

"Run!" Severus ordered, and they all followed Severus's lead, the previously encircled combatants racing down from the stairs and literally over the Death Eaters' bodies as their final steps, Harry's shoe satisfyingly trampling the unconscious dark head of hair of Bellatrix, who it seemed Draco's spell had caught instead.

Draco ran over and crashed into Harry and felt Harry's wild desperate arms around him steadying him, Harry's lips against his forehead, even as Harry's blood dripped from Harry's face onto Draco's. But then, Draco hardly knew whose blood was whose anymore, and what was blood or water or sweat or acid or tears, as if they had been all fighting against the very castle of Nurmengard only for it to turn on their foes instead. The wildest fancies went through his mind of shooting Killing Curses backwards towards the heap of bodies, where some had rebounded while struggling and fallen backwards into the water too- killing everyone if that was what it took to take Bellatrix down while he could, but they had to go, that was all-

There was a pathway remaining to get out of the foyer around the lake. Draco led the way, pulling Grindelwald with Harry while Dobby and Severus shielded Gilderoy with their wands. The ceiling of the foyer had already begun to cave in. They barely managed to dodge one of the last remaining stones overhead once they were in the entrance hall, the sight of bright blue sky open to them with only a slender path forwards, but they were taking it. No one seemed to be coming after them. The only one he'd seen for sure intact with his magic was Theo- but no, there were a few more footsteps after them still, dark silhouettes crossing the same threshold and climbing after them over broken stone...

The five of them ran out of Nurmengard and Draco nearly stumbled over Karkaroff's cooling body. He didn't trample it, but it was a near thing.

"Are we outside the wards?" Gilderoy asked anxiously, only for Severus to dive in between him and the entrance to Nurmengard when flashes of light still flew out at them from it. But the curse to fear was one from Theo, who screamed Sectumsempra like he would happily die if it hit its target, wand pointed solely at Draco-

Draco didn't know if Grindelwald deliberately blocked Draco from the curse, or if he had just already been stumbling. As it was, the panting, exhausted body of Gellert Grindelwald took the curse meant for Draco Black. It was only his arm that did, though, catching him somewhere on the side, making him howl in pain from it, but not hesitate very long indeed before raising in each hand a stolen wand and majestically bellowing,

"PROTEGO DIABOLICA!"

Fire poured from both of Grindelwald's wands, blue fire nothing like Draco's had been in the Department of Mysteries: it was twice as thick, twice as pure and hot-looking a brilliant blue, bluer than the sky above them on that windy summer day. Curses were cut short by the eruption of flame between them over the alpine stone, the mountain beneath them itself seeming to rumble as its uneven stone glittered and shone Patronus-blue, reflections like fire flowed not just from Grindelwald but from beneath their very feet, from the mountain itself, from Nurmengard, protecting his own...

"This is my castle!" Grindelwald screamed at the top of his lungs, laughing in exhilaration, his bleeding red arm still lofted as high as the left as the flames arched into a semi-circle. He turned with the magisterial flourish of a conductor and finished a circle around them that looked geometrically perfect even under the circumstances.

It was worthy of a white opal as the world around them went from deathly to beautiful, a cocoon of blue safety where none who wished them harm could pass. Draco had only ever seen this spell cast before so beautifully in the memories of Dantanian Noir. Dantanian had cast it the same way, with the same sweeping sideways motion making not jets but sheets of fire like waterfalls.

"Draco!" Theo's voice could distantly be heard screaming, as if screaming for his help, or more likely his head. "Draco! DRACO!"

"Can we Apparate out?" Gilderoy gasped, tears running down his face from pain- Draco had no idea where or how he was hurt, but all it meant was they needed more desperately to get out of there, before Voldemort might show up, Naufragiam or not, because he'd showed he could break Protego Diabolica- just Draco's, but still-

"Yes!" Grindelwald called, throwing his head fully back in one last spasm of pure happiness. The flames soared high above them in response, as if sharing in his joy, the blue of them shooting high enough to blend in completely with the blue of the sky. "Go! Go! Now!"

And then Grindelwald had seized Draco's arm and they were no longer in a world of fire and screaming. They were still staring out at blue, but it was a different blue: the unmistakably keen green of turquoise water, what Draco knew from experience of L'Infern to be a glacier lake. An alpine lake, it was, reflected with the evergreen trees all around the craggy stone rising high above them reflected on the water. They were no longer on stone, but the pure virgin white of never-touched snow. Grindelwald pressed his filthy face into it and kept laughing, as the blood poured from his arm into the snow.

"Did we do it? We escaped?" Draco asked in sheer disbelief, and Grindelwald nodded his head, laughing like the funniest joke in history had just been told.

"Is this not beautiful?" Grindelwald asked through his laughs which sounded almost hysterical now, the distinction between them and sobs almost indistinguishable- because they were sobs. Grindelwald's hurt arm was clutched to his side, where blood was pooling not just from the arm but the torso beneath. Theo's curse had cut him worse than Draco thought. "Could there be a more beautiful place to die?"

"What are you talking about?"

Grindelwald rolled over to lie on his back in the snow, not seeming to feel the cold as anything but a relief. He was covered from head to toe in filth and blood, and yet the brilliance of his eyes was undiminished beneath the fall of sweat-soaked hair. Draco pushed the hair out of them and found them dazed, wider than they should have been. "What? What?"

Grindelwald's tired lips creased up into a smile, and his hand fell from his side. The cut into his side extended all the way up, and into his chest.

Draco screamed. And realized that Protego Diabolica Grindelwald had cast under such pain had been his final spell. He'd already taken the deathblow.

"No," Draco said unsteadily. "No, I'll heal you, I know a spell, there's a song..."

"It's too late!" Grindelwald exclaimed, and tried to raise his other arm in some gesture, but failed to have the strength. "Can't you see it's too late, Kaktusblüte? Now, you stubborn boy, will you listen to me? Listen, Draco Black, because I do believe these will be the last words I will ever say."

"NO!" Draco yelled. "I'll take us to- to a hospital- to St. Mungo's, I'll make a Portkey, there's another way, there has to be, you're not going to *die*-"

So Draco had ruined everything. *Everything.* And now another man was going to die because of him. A man who still smiled at him and called him Kaktusblüte.

"That boy," Grindelwald said hazily. "That boy, what was his name, the boy who killed me? He cannot have been the one. Not him to kill me, no."

"Theodore Nott," Draco gasped, more of a sob, a broken feeling erupting in his chest he did not understand, a feeling like a hand had seized upon everything inside it and twisted it as sodding and bloody as Grindelwald's chest, that cut so deep he thought wildly he could almost make out the unsteady rhythm of the heart still beating. "He's Theo. Theodore Nott."

"It can't be him," Grindelwald said, with a surreal confidence. "It has to be you, Kaktusblüte. You have to be the one to kill me."

"No!" Draco shrieked, scrambling away from him in the blood-soaked snow. The reflection of the trees on the lake before them remained no less hatefully beautiful. "No, what are you talking about? No, I can't! You are not going to die! This is my fault! This is all my fault!"

"No, my dearest boy," Grindelwald said, reaching out a limp, bloodied hand as if beseeching him not to leave. Trembling, Draco crawled back towards him, knees soaking in melting red. "No, as you told me, sweet boy, I was already doomed to die. Now it will have been at the hands of a beautiful young man, and that other- that other dark lord will not have the satisfaction-" When he coughed, blood came up, as if his lungs had been punctured too by the cut, filling his mouth. The thought made Draco feel so ill it was like he could taste the blood in his own mouth, clogging his own throat. "I only ask you be the beautiful young man to finish off the job, Mr. Black. You cannot imagine how unhappy I will be if you- if you deprive me of this last gift."

"Gift?" Draco cried, and his hands shot out to grip on Grindelwald's shoulder before he remembered the way the man had been cut. He was trying so hard not to look at the wound, looking only at that hideously blissful face, and yet he could not escape it in his peripheral vision like the whole world was filling now with the dripping of red, not flame but blood

springing up from mountain stone. It was blood on his own hands, whether or not he struck the final blow. "Gift? You call it a gift?"

"I will not be trite," Grindelwald coughed, "And waste my remaining time, expounding how meeting you has been the final, most unexpected, undeserved pleasure of my long and wasted life. But yes, that is one gift you must give me. I demand it of you, Draco Black. And I must demand one more thing, and then you will kill me with a smile still on my lips."

"Is it- what to do with your body?" Draco gasped in horror, and Grindelwald kept on that sobbing-laughing again. He tilted his head to look past Draco, as if trying to burn the sight of the alpine lake onto them as their very last sight.

"No, a body is a body," Grindelwald coughed impatiently. "Do with it as you wish- bury it- throw it in the lake- feed it to dogs for all I care, I will be dead, what is it to me? What you must do is- forgive me for my lies to you. I wanted to live. And I must ask- ask much. And Albus. And *Albus*."

"Do you want me to tell him that you love him?" Draco gasped, and their gazes met for such a long time that Draco thought Grindelwald was silently agreeing with the proposition. Then Grindelwald laughed again, a harsh wheezing sound that was drawing up blood too, and Draco realized the hesitation had been because the man was truly in his death knell.

"No!" Grindelwald exclaimed, letting his head fall back into the snow, last effort to see the world done, where he would only stare at a crystal-blue, completely clear sky. "No. I want you to tell him he did not kill his sister. Tell him- tell him *I* killed Ariana Dumbledore."

"Did you?" Draco asked, leaning over Grindelwald still barely able to understand or process what was happening, and Grindelwald made one mammoth final effort to jerk his head yes, even as Draco could see clear as the man was dying that the man was lying.

"Tell him that," Grindelwald insisted, and Draco nodded. "Use his curse, so none blame you, Kaktusblüte. Make sure when you cut me open- cut me deep," he said, and Draco's trembling hands raised.

"I can't," Draco said numbly. The word, the thought just wouldn't come. He could barely recall the syllables of Sectumsempra.

"You must," Grindelwald said, and closed his eyes peacefully, turning his head to the side as if he was going to sleep in the snow. "Do not forget and tell Albus."

"Sectumsempra," Draco sobbed out, putting his wand right to Grindelwald's chest and slicing through. Then he dropped his wand into the snow to the side of the body and began to sob.

It was only as Draco finally lifted his bleak gaze, tears dripping down over the body, that Draco noticed the gleam of something inside Grindelwald's *chest*, beside the red mass of what had once been his heart. Draco thought he must be hallucinating, but he reached out and took it, and the silver shine under red was real between his fingers. It was something the size of his palm, and fit there like a still-beating heart.

It was impossible to tell what it was for some time, uselessly wiping at it with his hands and sleeves, only getting it filthier and bloodier. Then he realized how he could see what it was, and plunged his arm with it elbow-deep into the snow. When he pulled his arm out, finally, he was shivering as well as sobbing, and the object he had taken from inside the torn chest of Grindelwald's he had cut open was showing him back his own reflection. It was a mirror.

It could not have been a simpler, plainer mirror, perfectly silver and reflective on both smooth circular sides, save an inscription carved in a circle all around the mirror's front.

Espilce ehtfog ninwa dehttae idyamht aedneve.

Even death may die at the dawning of the eclipse.

Grindelwald's Gift

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Draco! Oh my God, dragon, it's you! We were terrified when you didn't come back here with us- we thought- I don't know..."

Harry flung his arms around Draco and pulled him to him so tightly, Draco lost hold of the body in his arms. There was still a wound on Harry's temple which Draco hadn't seen him receive. Harry had his share of blood and filth on him, but nothing compared to the blood and guts and muck and snow that Draco sullied him with by his embrace. Nothing compared to the corpse that the embrace sent falling at their feet. It kept Draco from hugging Harry back, still in a hazy sort of dream where he had killed Gellert Grindelwald and taken the third mirror from inside his body, where it now illusively rested in his lower right robe pocket.

"DRAGON-FACE!" Sirius virtually wailed, and plowed into Draco from the other side, embracing him forcefully. Remus came forward to touch Draco's arm reassuringly too, but was responsible enough to take charge of the body at their feet, pulling it up and staring into the peaceful cold face with its eternally closed eyes.

"Aren't you angry?" Draco asked Sirius meekly, not even sure which guilt he was attempting to assuage, and Sirius shook his head.

"Draco," Sirius said, voice thick with feeling, "I'm just so, so grateful you're alive."

"We love you, Draco," Remus said, and recklessly let go of Grindelwald to press his forehead to Draco's. "We just love you ever so much. We can talk about what happened later. For the moment, like Sirius said- we were just terrified we'd never see you again, except perhaps as..." His gaze drifted down again to the lifeless form fallen below them.

"Gellert," Albus Dumbledore breathed, in a stunned wondering voice somewhere nearby. Then he strode quickly towards them, eyes all calm competence behind his spectacles. "Gellert Grindelwald," he identified more neutrally, false face already in place as if it had never fallen. "This is Gellert Grindelwald. Poppy!" Poppy was Madam Pomfrey's first name, it seemed, and she was standing near where Harry had been, previously seeing to that head wound. "Poppy, you must see if he is-"

"He's dead," Draco said, to forestall any self-torturous attempts at useless revival. "That's why we took longer than the others. He took us to this beautiful lake where he wanted to die."

"Theo!" Harry gasped. "Theo got him? That cutting curse?"

Draco inwardly thanked Harry for establishing guilt other than Draco's as soon as possible. Another still more detached part mocked himself for the retained ability to look to his own advantage, even after everything that had just happened. Everything he had just done.

"Severus?" Draco asked, pulling back, while Dumbledore solemnly levitated the body upwards, joined in a moment by the ashen-faced Madam Pomfrey and a sharp-eyed Professor McGonagall. "Dobby? Gilderoy, did they all make it-"

He answered his own question whipping his head about. He was glad for Harry and Sirius's hands on his shoulders to steady him, as the world reeled in senseless *order*, like the situation had already begun to take stock of itself and resolve while Draco had been at the killing. There was Dobby, sitting on a great rough stone boulder in the center of the empty courtyard, head hung in what looked disconcertingly like shame. There was Gilderoy, sat right on the ground nearer to the library tower, with a thousand-yard stare in his bright blue eyes. Once their gazes met, that stare turned relieved and comforted, presumably at Draco's survival intact. Gilderoy gave a bright smile that almost steeled Draco enough to face the man standing over Gilderoy: Severus, the one of the combatants who looked the least devastated within or without, even as he must have already admitted to Dumbledore that his position as spy was no more...

It was exactly what Draco had wanted. One of the goals for the year, even. Unless it meant he had broken something irreparably that had once led to the Order's victory. Draco's eyes went in confusion to Dumbledore's departing back as he wondered, *I suppose then Severus* won't *be murdering you?*

Get with the program, Draco, seems you're the one who does all the murdering now.

His gaze finally made the full circle to alight upon the rest of their friends, together in one great mob. They were being seen to by their relatives, a great pocket of Weasleys hovering protectively over Ron and Ginny, the Longbottoms over Neville, and Xenophilius with his arms around both Luna and Hermione's shoulders. The students looked unharmed, at least physically, but they were in the process of being fussed over nonetheless, as if they had experienced some great ordeal as well...

"Hermione, are you alright?" Draco called, and she nodded, with a face tight with stress.

"I'm sorry!" she called, voice lashing and strident. "I'm so sorry!"

Draco had no idea what for until Harry reminded him, as much for Sirius and Remus's ears as Draco's, "They were supposed to be waiting here, in case Dobby came back to bring more help. But they got a letter from Bellatrix Lestrange- everything the same as the letter you got from her with the Black Dagger, except no dagger-"

"A letter that told us you'd been abducted and taken to Godric's Hollow," Luna called miserably, "So we all went there, and we searched for you so long, and then when we finally realized no one was there..."

"We came back to Xaphan, and Karkaroff was gone," Neville finished, and Severus's gaze was like lead on Draco.

"Indeed," Severus intoned. "Karkaroff is gone."

"And you're not," Draco said fiercely, unwilling to apologize for what he'd done. In Sirius's case, the implicit challenge in Severus's words made him practically snarl at his fellow member of the Order, before Draco pulled him back into a fiercer embrace, Remus holding Harry's face and speaking to him quietly at their side.

"So that was Grindelwald, and he's dead?" Ginny called despondently, and Hermione seemed to answer her in the affirmative. "So it was all for nothing?" The mirror felt like it was burning a hole in Draco's pocket, even as he fought to keep his exhausted face level and sadly nod.

"Can I hug my cousin now?" Luna asked, and barely waited for her father's answer before sprinting over and thudding into Draco. "Oh, Draco, we are, we're so, so sorry, if we had just waited at Xaphan longer and ignored the letter, then we could have come to protect you all like we *promised*..."

Draco only realized Luna's distress was partially performative when he felt her little hand prod him secretively in the chest. "If you have anything you don't want found, give me," she whispered, before letting out another set of apologies, one Hermione joined in full sincerity.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Luna, we did the best we could. But Frankenstein, we *are* sorry," Ron said, approaching. Draco took the chance to seize Ron at one side, seize Luna back at the other side and press the mirror into Luna's pocket, unseen. Who on the planet could Draco trust more with his secrets, now that he had been relieved of even the corpse of Grindelwald?

There was much fussing and crying then, and chairs were eventually found for some from the now-crowded library tower. All of the combatants were seen to by Madam Pomfrey, though only Harry and Draco were injured, and Draco minimally, his busted lip quickly healed. Dumbledore and McGonagall remained elsewhere.

The insistent Weasleys departed first, Molly Weasley looking torn between relief and fury at her children's secret activities. Hermione had no parents to take her back to her home or Hogwarts, but Remus stayed near her, once she had gotten her fill of hugging Draco and apologizing to the moon and back, as if every drop of blood on Draco's body was personally her fault.

Draco put together the rest of it in pieces from different people: once the others had returned to Xaphan and found no one there, they realized they must have been had, and any Death Eater threat must be at Nurmengard itself. They had wanted to go right to Nurmengard, to charge into whatever awaited come hell or high water, but they couldn't without Dobby. So Hermione had Apparated all the way back to Hogwarts, stopping in the empty back lot of Highbury on her way, and rushed to Dumbledore's office to tell him everything. Understandable, under the circumstances. Despite her anxious whimpers, he didn't begrudge her the choice.

All he had needed to hear was that Harry was in danger and he and McGonagall had followed her right to Xaphan, where they knew Severus had been going to check in on Gilderoy.

Waiting for them there had been not only the others of the Xaphan contingent but the newly arrived Dobby and Harry, and then appearing before their eyes had been the mortally exhausted Gilderoy and Severus. Word was sent to the families, the danger seeming over, except for the small fact that Draco and, yes, Gellert Grindelwald had still been missing. What Dumbledore, king of the world, had made of all this, there was no telling.

The effusion over their truly lucky survival was starting to wear off, with the adults beginning to come down off that high now and process exactly how reckless the students had been, along with Dobby and Gilderoy. Gilderoy had still not gotten up, and when Draco went over to him, all he could get out of him other than relief at Draco's survival was, nonsensically, apologies, and the repeated refrain, *Your godfather is going to kill me.*

Draco had to risk that. When McGonagall departed, taking a Portkey back to Hogwarts along with the remaining students, he left his well-wishers to look for a body that had been taken out of his possession. And the man he found still lingering over it, staring at Grindelwald's contented, frozen visage without recognizable emotion on his own aged face, still in Draco's eyes so much less full of life than Grindelwald had been.

It was the most unspeakably bizarre thing, how Draco had been something like fine before, and yet at the sight of that body, he found himself on the verge of breaking down, in front of the last person on their side he ever wanted to show weakness. Dumbledore didn't break the tense mournful air to greet him. That silence unnerved more than any words.

Does he know? Oh Merlin, of course he knows, he has to, it's written on me like a brand, what I did. It marks me and it's indelible. Like the word thief on his palm had been in third year, but now it was *Murderer.* Whore, Blood Traitor, Murderer was written confirmed in the aftershock of green light over Karkaroff and then the wrenching tearing open of Grindelwald, and after all, Draco was already scheming, already looking towards concealment with Luna for his prize from yet another murder.

Dumbledore broke the silence after some time, without warning. Not looking up at Draco, he said, "You did warn me."

He startled politeness out of Draco as a default. "Sorry, sir?"

"You did warn me," Dumbledore intoned, "That if I sent you away without the information you wanted, that you would ensure I would regret it."

"I didn't... I never imagined anything like this," Draco stammered, staring down at that body magically suspended in stasis, with a surge of guilt that had his heart beating fast in his ears. "I didn't want this," he said, even as the presence of the mirror he'd wanted so badly in Luna's pocket made it feel like a vicious lie.

"You went to him for answers," Dumbledore prompted gently, both of them looking at Grindelwald rather than the other. Dumbledore hadn't said anything to hint Grindelwald was any more to him than an old enemy, but after all, after that blackmail attempt, Dumbledore knew Draco knew.

"I didn't want him dead. I didn't even want him hurt," Draco said quickly, as if that was what Dumbledore had been accusing. "I didn't- I know he was- like, a monster, alright? I know you did the world a service bringing him down and getting him locked up, but- it *wasn't* a monster, who he was now." A stifled noise of surprise put Draco further on the defensive, wishing he'd left Dumbledore well enough alone. "He was- I don't know how to explain it, but he was kind to me."

"Kind to you," Dumbledore echoed, with no inflection to the words except perhaps a hint of irony.

"He was charming," Draco tried to excuse himself, since if nothing else Dumbledore had to remember that about the man. "And when I asked him if he regretted the things he did, fighting for wizard supremacy, he said he did." Damn it all, he found himself somehow Grindelwald's advocate, to the man Draco despised but Grindelwald must somehow have still loved, for the last word on his dying lips to have been Albus.

"He lived longer than he thought he would," Dumbledore reflected, corners of his lips twisting up in something nothing like a smile. "He believed when he was young that he would go out early, in a blaze of glory. It must not have suited him, all those years in Nurmengard as a slow death."

"He did deserve it, though," Draco decided to say at last, and brought out the gift he had come to pass on. "Because he killed your sister."

Dumbledore's gaze jerked up like Voldemort had just arrived to pay his condolences.

"I think that's why he really took me away, when he knew he was dying," Draco said, pressing his advantage to get it all out while Dumbledore was still listening, and not trying to leave or murder Draco for the affront. "He wanted to confess what he'd done back then. He wanted y- wanted the world to know the Dumbledores were innocent."

"He said this?" Dumbledore breathed, detachment gone, despite the sound of disbelief wrenching through every word he spoke. "He was certain. You believed him. He was history's greatest liar-"

"But this is different. He was dying, he had no advantage left to gain," Draco embellished, doing his own share of lying now, for all it indeed was worth to the dead man now. "What good would it do?"

It was his final present to you, you stubborn ungrateful man he loved so much, so take it and don't ask questions you don't want answered. I'm not the only one that the Great Dread Dark Lord Grindelwald left behind a gift.

"So that is why you linger here. To fulfill his dying wish, by telling me the fate of my sister Ariana," Dumbledore summarized, sounding like he wanted to believe almost more powerfully than he disbelieved. His hands had gone down to grip the side of the slab where Grindelwald wrested, as if holding back from seizing the corpse and trying to wrench the truth directly from him.

"And to pay my respects. I asked him for the Resurrection Stone, you know. And he never had it, but he did say he searched for it once, because," and here was a piece of truth that might win the day for the lie, "He told me he would have used it to bring Ariana Dumbledore back."

"No," Dumbledore said, gaze snapping to Draco's like a firebrand at that of all things. "You are *lying*, Mr. Black, you are lying about things you will never understand-"

And Draco could insist with a clear conscience, "No, I'll swear on anything you want, he said those words to me. He would have brought your sister back to life."

Thankfully for the sake of both of their sanity, someone arrived to break the tense impasse between them. Even if that person had to be Severus, the one Draco was least looking forward to facing. "Hi, Severus," Draco said, putting on a face like he couldn't be happier or with a more untroubled conscience to face his godfather. "How are you doing? Do you have any news for us? Do you know what will be done with the body?"

"The Austrian ministry will anonymously be told he is dead," Dumbledore answered, after a brief exchange of glances with Severus. "There is no question of returning the body. He will be interred here at Xaphan."

"He would have loved that. He was very fond of Xaphan," Draco enthused, only to regret the slip.

"Grindelwald had been to Xaphan?" Dumbledore asked sharply. "When?"

"A long time ago," Draco hedged. "It's not really important."

Severus barked out a sardonic laugh. "No doubt my formidable godson has learned a great deal about Grindelwald, sir. I do hope it was worth the cost." He looked at Draco like a first-year Neville Longbottom. "Empty your pockets."

"What?" Surreally, it was like déjà vu from Nurmengard, when Bellatrix had been giving the orders.

"Grindelwald may have imparted some final gift that we are unaware of," Severus said to Dumbledore, with an intensity like the thought had just come to him and refused to leave him. "Empty your pockets, boy."

"Grindelwald's final gift has already been given," Draco protested, but after making a show of reluctance, he emptied all his robe and trouser and jumper pockets to reveal nothing but the talon wand, a draught of peace, his copy of *Construction and Deconstruction*, and Severus's old gift to him, of the liquid Fiendfyre.

Severus stared at him still like he could see through him, and knew he was holding something back from the professors, but as Draco gathered his things back up, he had no recourse but to bite out some sarcastic comment and sweep his way out. Draco's jerky glug from the draught of peace as he left threatened to goad him further, from his glare, but he managed to control himself and depart nonetheless. No doubt he had other questions in his mind to answer.

Draco should have taken the chance to make his own hasty retreat, but he had the worst question left to ask. "Sir, I don't mean to disturb you much longer, but- if I can ask, do you know what will happen with Theo now?"

"He will be expelled from Hogwarts," Dumbledore said in a tone of surprise, as if he had thought it obvious. "Your godfather's earlier testimony to me of Mr. Nott's actions had already sufficed. But I do not imagine he would attempt to return."

"And me? What will happen to me?" Draco heard the selfishness in his voice, and made the effort to amend it, weak as he was beginning to feel. "I want you to know, Headmaster, that everything was my idea, and any punishment to come, it shouldn't be on the others. It should all fall on my head. Not *Dobby's*, you must still employ him at Hogwarts, whatever the penalty that incurs for me-"

"Brave indeed, Mr. Black," Dumbledore said with that glimmer of irony. "And not over-keen on self-preservation. Not so much the Ravenclaw as the Gryffindor." It was hard not to think back then to the Hat telling Draco he would never belong in Gryffindor. *Did I win my place on the bench of suicidal idiots at last?*

"Well, it's not like I'm going to be expelled or something," Draco laughed. Except Dumbledore did not laugh or smile, and a silence loomed that proved far more weighty than one would hope in that context.

Draco tried again for levity. "It's not like I'm a Death Eater or something, so..."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said softly, "You are not, Mr. Black. You are perhaps something even more dangerous." He let that sit in the air for a time before proceeding briskly, "Go to your godfather, he will take you back to Grimmauld Place. And he will be the one to ask you any further questions."

The difficulty with Dumbledore's command was not finding Severus, but what he found Severus immersed in. Severus seemed to have gone straight from Grindelwald's body to the library tower, and by the time Draco located him there, the sinking feeling in his gut was becoming a palpable thing, as world-jostling as his own guilt. That shadow of flames before a moon eclipsed became reality as Draco made his way into the tower only to stop at the threshold to the inner chamber, hearing voices speaking in hostility.

He shouldn't have watched and listened, like he shouldn't have spied on so much between these two. But he wanted to protect Gilderoy, should things come to true humiliation or even violence. He owed the poor man that much. And the fire had showed him this already.

"What have you done?" Severus asked, voice composed and cold. It was sunny in the tower, which the recent time in Nurmengard made look a well-built and secure and even cheery place, but the air was glacial here too nonetheless. A look over at Gilderoy showed that this must not be the first times Severus was admonishing him. There were tears in his eyes, whimpers issuing from his trembling lips, neither of which seemed to touch Severus's vicious

outrage. It seemed Severus had finally found someone to blame for the mammoth betrayal of the Nurmengard expedition, and it was not Draco but Gilderoy.

"How deep does the betrayal go? I thought- I suppose I must have thought us something like *friends*." He spat out the word with baffled disgust at himself. "Have you been playing me from the start? Why should I have expected anything different from Gilderoy Lockhart? Well, see what your lies have wrought! *What have you done, Gilderoy?*"

Gilderoy's knees had already been trembling along with his weak lips. Now they folded, taking him the short distance from hunched over down to the tower floor. He fell there, left knee onto a discarded old book that had to be prodding into the side of his leg. He didn't seem to feel it, caught in wordless appeal of supplication to a man he regarded like the personal arbiter of his fate.

"Have you no answer?" Severus demanded scathingly.

"No answer," Gilderoy gasped, looking as terrified as he must have ever in his existence. "No answer, just- I didn't mean to betray you, Severus. Not you. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry-"

"What is this begging and cringing? Do you imagine I will hurt you?" Severus began to pace, full of nervous energy he seemed to want Gilderoy sure would not be vented on him. "Do you imagine I am like the man whose initials you still wear? Do you?" Gilderoy shook his head, but Severus seemed to have taken his obvious fear and kneeling as a further affront. "You may well," he snapped sarcastically. "Those initials are mine too-"

"I wish they *were* yours!" Gilderoy cried out, truth forced out of him now of all times, and just like that, Severus's pacing ceased.

He steadied himself on a bookshelf. Books fell, somehow without his noticing. The tower might as well have been empty for both of them, of a thing save each other.

"I wish I was yours." Gilderoy raised his face, confident in the strength of that feeling if nothing else. "I wouldn't ever try to betray you, Severus, because I love you."

Severus stood there for a long moment, watching one small tear glide from Gilderoy's melting-blue eyes and trace a trail over his flushed cheek. Then he stood up straighter and drew his robes tighter about himself, like putting on an invisibility cloak, or at least some kind of armor. "You mock me. Or you disrespect me, to think such lies would ever be believable to me now."

"SS," Gilderoy insisted, voice gone feverish now too, not moving from his knees. "That's what I want on me, that's why I kissed you at the beach, Severus, it's you, I've wanted you for so long, and now you just tell me I'm a liar-"

"'For so long'," Severus echoed contemptuously. "I suppose you expect me to think that includes your brief disastrous stint at my job at Hogwarts? That between signing autographs and answering fan mail, the lauded hero Gilderoy Lockhart was pining away of love for me-"

"I sent you a letter!" Gilderoy blurted, and Draco put his head in his hands, as the last piece he had warned Gilderoy not to admit to was thrown out into the open too. "I asked you to come meet me at midnight, at the Astronomy Tower, and I would have confessed everything, but you never came. Do you not recall it? I sent you gilded roses. Gilded, like Gilderoy, for my name. And a gilded tapestry. Have you forgotten-"

"The tapestry, I burnt," Severus admitted in a dazed tone, face fallen slack in pure shock. "Such ridiculous gestures? I do not recall its color."

"It was gold," Gilderoy insisted, "Like me, I'm gold!" Then he seemed to take stock of himself and amended, "I *was* gold. I- I loved you then, Severus, and I love you now. Sometimes it's enough to drive me mad-"

"*Are* you mad?" Severus gasped, hands going to his mouth, as he backed away from Gilderoy, towards the farthest distance the small tower room would allow them from each other. "You must have gone mad."

"Why? Do you still not believe me?" Gilderoy said sadly. "Or- mad to think you would ever accept me? Believe me, Severus, I have no illusions of that, not now that I betrayed you, not before, not ever- I just wanted you to know that what I did for Draco, the way I hid it from you, it was just *for* Draco, because he was my savior and I owe him everything- not *against* you, Severus. Never against you. If I had my way, I would never have lied to you, not once in my life- I am sure you wished you had never had to lie to your godson about the memories, as I wished too, but things can all get so muddled-"

"You are mad," Severus said curtly, cutting through Gilderoy's babble with the stunned look remaining on his pale face, "To hold such... sentiments towards one such as I."

"Why?" Gilderoy asked, sounding in full innocence. He bent his head lower, as if to make it abundantly clear how far below Severus he believed himself. "Why should someone not love you, Severus? I love you. I love you more than you will ever know."

Severus stood there for some time, understanding seeming finally to sweep through him, and pacify him, even as it left him looking yet more unhappy. "Oh, Gilderoy," he said tiredly. "Get up." When Gilderoy didn't immediately obey, he went over and took both of Gilderoy's hands to haul him up himself. Gilderoy inclined towards the touch like a plant towards sunlight, and when Severus tried to let him go, Gilderoy brought both of their linked hands together and tried to kiss Severus's. Severus yanked them sharply away, and Gilderoy's face crumbled.

"Sorry," Gilderoy said quickly, "I just want you to believe me-"

"I believe you," Severus said quietly. "I believe you are mad, but I believe you. Oh, Gilderoy. What have you done to yourself? It is impossible. I am sorry. I am truly sorry, but it is impossible. It will always be impossible."

"You mean- you and I?" Gilderoy ventured, and Severus nodded. Maybe there had still been some remote glimmer of hope in Gilderoy, because Draco could see it in the air there, gilded, fading. "I- I accept it, just- why not? Because I lied?" Severus shook his head, looking more

troubled and tired and haunted than any man should ever have had to be. "Because- do I have nothing to appeal to you? Because- Severus, I would- I would demand nothing. Only to be near you, to try and make you happier."

Severus shut his eyes tightly, as if against an unexpected pain. "Please, Gilderoy. Don't."

"Is there someone else?"

Severus's eyes opened. "Yes," he said quietly, "There is another. There will always be another."

Gilderoy let out a gasp like he'd been slapped, but Severus just stared at him hopelessly. "I am sorry, Gilderoy. But my entire life, I have only ever loved one person. I will only ever love one person. I am, indeed, most sorry."

"Who?" Gilderoy breathed. "Do they feel the same, or-"

"She is dead," Severus said, turning his face away. "It changes nothing. It is only her I have always loved, and her I shall love to the end."

Sirius and Remus received Draco at Grimmauld with more hugs and affection, not quite out of the *yay-you're-not-a-corpse* phase of reactions. Draco took them gratefully after what he'd just had to witness. Even if it seemed Severus could use them far more. Let alone Gilderoy, back at that great empty castle alone.

Severus left them alone, and it was not long before Draco was bustled up to his bedroom for some much-needed rest, and the ominous echo of Severus from Remus that they would *talk a great deal tomorrow.*

"Here," Remus said, and waved his wand with the ease of clear practice. The ceiling filled with Patronus-blue wisps of light, not quite the way Draco did them- the way it seemed Dantanian had, one of so many habits of his that turned out not to be purloined... But Remus's innovation was more than welcome, compared to the dead magic-less aspect of before, which had made the space seem barely his own.

"Thank you," Draco said, with feeling. "You must have worked hard to get it that pretty." It was true that the feathering of the light at its edges showed a delicacy and refinement absent from Draco's intense creations. "I like your version, Remus. The way the whiter parts-"

"Draco," Remus interrupted, face tight with self-enforced detachment. "I am tired. We may speak more on the morrow." He left Draco's room without another word, and Draco instantly felt like crying. Which he supposed did make this an effective punishment, this presumably brief but quite icy June exile.

When Draco went back out, thinking to extract one more hug, he found them already halfway down the stairs, quietly arguing with each other from the sounds of it. He didn't want to do

any more eavesdropping that night, so he went back into his bedroom. He was too tired to put up the Patronus-colored lights and bluebell flames.

All he did before he changed for bed and fell into it, nearly unconscious from exhaustion the moment his face hit the pillow, was ensure that his gift had gone safely from robe to pajama trouser pocket. Luna and her father had been lingering to see him off, since Sirius and Remus had already gone off to take Hermione and Harry to Hogwarts. Another hug, another maneuvering of Luna's deft little hands, and the third mirror had returned, what the universe had yielded from this long nightmare. Who indeed was more trustworthy than Luna Lovegood?

He slept with it cool and motionless at his side, the talon wand ever-secure beside his pillow nearby. He would show it formally to the wand, offer it to Dantanian as a bribe to speak to him tomorrow.

He knew, of course, even before he made the offer the next morning, that Dantanian would not respond. Indeed, the talon wand itself stayed unimpeachably still.

All the same, he was lucky that he had tried it so early in the day. Remus announced flatly that Draco would be handing over his wand until further notice, with Sirius in the background making apologetic faces he quickly stopped when Remus looked in his direction. Draco handed the talon wand gingerly over to Remus, thinking all the while at it not to hurt him. Remus was able to lock it away in a small magical chest put on the mantelpiece in the second floor parlor. A chest for which Draco was not given spell or key to unlock.

Draco thought that the loss of his wand would be the worst of the day. He had not, though, had to face Severus yet. Severus had the grace not to demand Draco's person searched again, and his baggy transfigured-blue pajamas concealed the mirror well, but Severus had not the same forbearance when it came to the room itself. "I haven't been here for months," Draco protested, to no avail.

"If there is no reason for me to search," Severus said silkily, "Then why do you wish me not to search it?"

The reasoning was indisputable. "Wait," Draco said, before something turned up to make an amiable Severus completely inaccessible to him. *I would settle for having him accessible to Gilderoy, really. If I have the temerity to ask what's going on there, is it less a question of* whether *I'll be verbally emotionally eviscerated than how much it will hurt?* "Wait, just let me ask one thing."

Severus let the door fall shut behind him, with a rather louder slam than Draco hoped he had meant. "Very well, then, formidable godson-"

"Stop calling me that," Draco said in a small voice. "I preferred 'burdensome'. Anyway, I just need to know one thing. What you did at Nurmengard, protecting me and Harry and all, you can't excuse that away as keeping up your cover, can you?" Severus shook his head curtly. "So you've been exposed to the Death Eaters."

"We are here to assess the level of your foolishness," Severus said tightly. "Not my own. If there is a point here-"

"So you can't be a spy anymore," Draco prompted. "That's all over. You won't be going back the next time the Dark Mark calls you. You're not going to pretend to be a Death Eater anymore. Because you can't. No double agent, no torture, no Voldemort, you're just part of the Order like the rest of us now."

"If you are done your gloating-"

"You are, aren't you-"

"Yes," Severus gritted out. "Much to my dismay, I have indeed been rendered useless in that manner-"

"Yes!" Draco howled, punching the air before him. He fell to sit on his bed with a wide baring of his teeth in incredulous laughter, the soaring feeling of his own happiness even more bracing than he would have expected, even more of a reward.

Even if he and Severus were a year or so away from becoming mutually exclusive.

"Yes! YES!"

It felt like winning the Quidditch Cup had in fifth year, felt the same as handing Severus the trophy for it. Even as Severus regarded him more balefully each time he punched the air and crowed in victory. "Yes, yes, yes-"

"That is more than enough of that," Severus said crisply. He began to open and shut Draco's drawers without further warning. Draco was laughing to himself, until a certain presence struck his memory, and then he could only laugh with a sane man's chuckle rather than a madman's.

"Wait, wait, Severus. Wait, I'll show you something, you just have to promise not to freak out-"

"I will promise no such thing," Severus said darkly, but there was no remedy regardless. Draco had no wand to burn or Vanish things away. And eventually, Severus would have made it to such an obvious hiding place as the closet.

The painting of the Antipodean Opaleye was prettier than he remembered, more of a three-dimensional sheen to the opalescence of the dragon. It was not perhaps as completely wrecked as he had been picturing it, either. But that did not make it any less chilling to see the words there again, carved in so deeply. And with such vehement feeling, as if Theo had done it himself with the dagger he had stolen- no less recently than yesterday, sneaking here in the night.

"'Whore'," Severus read impassively, with the painting hanging from his hands like an effigy. "'Blood traitor. Murderer.' One presumes you did not do this in a fit of self-castigation."

"No, it was- like the Slytherin table at Hogwarts, still- it was a Black Dagger, held back by a shield. It carved this dragon instead. Those were the words from it."

"So Bellatrix Lestrange was more generous a correspondent than you led us to believe," Severus observed wryly. "Another secret you bring. How recent was this Black Dagger? For the death of Karkaroff, or-"

"It's for Mr. Nott," Draco blurted, heart in his ears, "And it was a year ago, last June, soon after I killed Mr. Nott, I'd been sent home, like I have now. It was- it was from-"

"Theodore Nott sent you a Black Dagger," Severus breathed, almost a real gasp from such an unflappable man. "Before sixth year even started. And you neglected to so much as inform us he-"

"You're the first person I *ever* told," Draco admitted, lest Severus think it had been an open secret in their group of friends like Nurmengard. *If Harry ever hears of this, he'll kill me himself, for not protecting myself enough.* "Theo wrote- he said that I killed his father, and he would accept no restitution but my life. In his letter. I didn't- I kept it to myself, because-"

"You had feelings for the boy, still?" Severus said in disbelief, and Draco shrugged weakly. "You pitied him," Severus surmised, and Draco nodded.

"I don't know who he's told," Draco began. "Probably Bellatrix Lestrange- from the look of them, you've heard they were *kissing*, maybe she was part of it from the start, even then, guiding him- the word *whore,* that's not like Theo, that's-"

"The Dark Lord kept any knowledge of Bellatrix's activities with Theo from me," Severus began, in a tightly-drawn, furious exhalation. "I believed him grieving but harmless. You allowed me to think him so. I allowed him back into Slytherin, as his Head of House- I took him on as my student in a NEWT-level Defense class, after he had told *my godson* he would *kill* him for what he had done- are you *smirking*?"

"No!" Draco exclaimed. "I just- I don't know what to say. I'm glad you care so much. That makes me happy." He put a hand over his mouth. "It just- it didn't seem like a big deal to me after a while. I've always known Theo wanted me dead for what I did. It was just obvious. And it was right he did-"

"Did you mean to *let* him kill you for it?"

"No. I couldn't have. I had nine names," Draco said, since if he was letting Severus proverbially into his mind, he might as well try and make him understand it. "Remus and Sirius. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Dobby. I had to keep them alive no matter what. Even if I was wrong, for what I did to Mr. Nott." Draco thought of that awful Pensieve memory in Severus's chambers, Mr. Nott saying *Incarcerous* and Draco killing him for it. "Even once I knew I had been wrong."

"That is only eight names."

"And you, obviously," Draco said impatiently, avoiding looking at whatever expression that put on Severus's face. "Are you going to tell Sirius and Remus that I kept this from them too? And that, from before- that I was wrong to think Mr. Nott had been going to kill Sirius- that I didn't really save Sirius's life, I just murdered an old man-"

"No," Severus sighed. He dropped the painting and sank to sit behind Draco, pinching the bridge of his nose. "There is no practical need. I repeat to you, that is our secret. No one must know the truth of Mr. Nott's death." He hesitated, eyeing Draco with something like sympathy, then of all moments. "Is that why you wished so powerfully to find the Resurrection Stone? To bring back Mr. Nott?"

It came back to Draco, then, that the Resurrection Stone *was* what he'd tried to blackmail out of Dumbledore, and sworn that Dumbledore would regret denying him. Combine that with his obsession with the Hallows last summer, and his visits to Grindelwald became explainable even without admitting about the mirrors. Who was Draco to let that luck go?

"Yes," Draco said, in a lie that felt true. "Yes, I wanted to find the Resurrection Stone with Grindelwald's help, so I could bring back Mr. Nott, and make things with Theo- I know they'd never be right again, not even with that. But so- so I could give Theo his life back. Make him Theo again. He's like a shade of himself. He's- he's a good Death Eater, isn't he? He'll do well... the perfect little dark wizard, he can already brag about Grindelwald to Voldemort..."

"Will *you* brag of the death of Karkaroff?" Severus asked thinly.

Draco had expected the sympathy to last a little longer.

"I take it that even with the supreme power you desire over the life and death of all, he is not one that you would restore if you could."

"No," was all Draco could say. *I wanted him dead, because he would always have been after* you. *He had to die for that. I told you, you're one of my names. That part's simple if you just listen.*

Severus did not tell him that was wrong. But he did put the painting aside, and, of all things, put a thin arm around Draco's shoulders, more weary than angry. "You are taking too many lives, Draco. You have taken too many already. No, Karkaroff will not be held against you either. Another death in combat. But this blood on your hands- it is too much. Not for the sake of the world, my boy, but for you. You should not have to carry the weight of so many dead on your shoulders." He squeezed the shoulders, as if to demonstrate how heavily the weight must press. Draco stared down at his hands, feeling like Severus had just cast Verniculpa on them.

Severus didn't even know what he'd had to do to Grindelwald. Perhaps because Grindelwald wanted to be sure ownership of the Mirror of Espilce passed to Draco instead of Theo, or perhaps just because Grindelwald wanted Draco to be the one to take his life. Severus didn't know that the weights on Draco amounted to- how many? Had he somehow lost count? He didn't even know how to count if he wanted to.

"My parents were there, you know," Draco said unsteadily, biting his lip to hold back unseemly tears in front of his godfather. "My mother too, not just Father. You saw them, didn't you. They saw me kill Karkaroff. Mother saw. They must think-" But then, how could they have had any illusions remaining? "I tortured them. Last summer. I tortured them both. That's worse than killing Karkaroff, isn't it, fighting my own parents- *torturing* my own parents-"

"Draco," Severus said, withdrawing his arm sharply. "Do not misunderstand. I am aware you saved my life. Why you used the Killing Curse instead of a Stunning curse, I do *not* know." Draco opened his mouth, and Severus held up his hand. "You will say you wished to be sure. As, perhaps, you did with Mr. Nott. All I mean to say, Draco, is that I know you will not keep your promise to me, to never kill. I know the war is far from over. It is only just beginning. I only ask that, as I pleaded with you before, that you use Sectumsempra instead. The Unforgivables can put you in prison for life, if the authorities find out and take it ill, no matter the circumstances..."

Draco could hardly listen after that, only nodding weakly in agreement to use Sectumsempra if he must kill. He could hardly resist the urge to tell Severus he had used Sectumsempra for Grindelwald, as if to receive House points for his judicious choice of killing methods.

House points would, funnily enough, have come in handy, given the points that had apparently been taken for their collective actions. It 2was more from Ravenclaw than Gryffindor despite the greater number of Gryffindors. 50 each for Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna, but 300 for Draco. So, 350 points from Ravenclaw. What a blessing Flitwick and the others must find it, to have had Draco Black sorted into their house.

Dobby was to suffer no disciplinary action. Apparently Dumbledore had come to that conclusion quickly. He had told Severus, both Dobby and Gilderoy were in the same position of deep debt to Draco, and could not be faulted for falling prey to his manipulations. The fault and the responsibility was Draco's, not theirs.

Well, Draco had asked it all be placed on him. And Dumbledore was right, wasn't he?

After that news, the rest of their conversation fell to details, like Draco's dagger, lost at the bottom of the artificial lake at Nurmengard, but no doubt recovered by the Death Eaters. Draco's throat was sore from talking by the time Severus was rising to leave, and even then, Draco had more to say.

"Thank you for not telling anyone else about Dantanian, not even Dumbledore," Draco blurted, forestalling Severus's unceremonious exit. "Thank you. I- I don't hate you for not telling me, anymore. I forgive you, Severus. I really have for a while, you just- you said it was good to keep my distance, so... anyway, I really don't hate you for it anymore."

Severus seemed to have to struggle to keep his face impassive, but he managed. "You have found, as I have long known, the utility of keeping secrets from those important to you. Whether or not in a case whose circumstances lead you to believe the secret to the benefit of the deceived." Draco nodded, rising. Severus's shoulders rose and fell in a shrug of assumed insouciance.

"And certainly that secrets do not necessarily preclude-" Severus wrinkled his nose, as if sullying himself to even speak the word. "Affection."

That was more than enough to make Draco seize Severus and hug the life out of him, despite the man's indignant protests. *I'm sorry,* Draco thought fiercely at him, with the words he couldn't say right now: neither *I love you,* nor *I'm sorry I'm a murderer.*

The aftermath of Severus's departure saw more words exchanged. And the exchange, or in this case even just the receiving, of words of censure from Remus Lupin? That was no light matter. Usually blessed with near-saintly equanimity, to draw harsh words from that long-suffering demeanor was a terrible accomplishment to claim. Even when they came in jest, they retained the power to make Sirius, for one, quail before them like a condemned sinner on the scaffold.

So Draco braced himself after Severus's brief conversation with his guardians and then departure, expectations of even so much as not angry just disappointed- a gutting thought. Remus called him down into the entry hall to formally bid Severus farewell, and after the Portkey's whirling lingered only in memory, the dreary hall of portraits terrified of Draco was the setting of a dressing-down the likes of which Draco and perhaps not even Sirius had never seen.

Remus's voice never rose once, nor did his tone go harsher or his posture alter. He leaned beside the tatters that had been Aunt Walburga's portrait and told Draco some things about himself. Things, he said, which he himself had only recently come to fully understand, so now he could impart to Draco. Things that Draco, one could infer, would most definitely not want to hear.

Draco tried to listen only as much as he had to, in order to avoid the appearance of not listening. Remus was certainly thorough, one could give him that. It mainly consisted of a litany of the advantages that Draco had over others. The power he wielded, not merely superficially- through finances, blood, connections- nor merely through personal appeal and friendship, but also through the twin pillars of debt and manipulation. Draco, Remus calmly stressed, needed not to misuse these powers of his, not to merely suit his own fantasies of power, because he was so capable, when it came to undermining the Order of the Phoenix and the work it was meant to do. Leading overall to the impression that if the wizarding world fell, it could very well be Draco's fault.

Which was a conclusion Draco could hardly dispute. After all, he'd just nearly gotten the savior killed.

After Draco was done being dressed down, he headed resolutely towards his bedroom, trying to hold back tears until his arrival there. But he was not quick enough to avoid hearing Sirius asking, "Do you think you were too hard on him?" at the same time as Remus asked, "Do you think I wasn't harsh enough?"

Frostiness between himself and Remus- as there was subsequently between Sirius and Remus- was far from his only punishment at Grimmauld. Without his wand, he was without means to secretly contact any of his friends. He had no doubt how such a lack of contact would affect Hermione with her worrying habits. Remus, who had forbidden contact as a punishment, assured him that Sirius was speaking to Harry regularly, and keeping everyone at Hogwarts appraised of everything that was happening with Draco- read, nothing- while it was deliberated what consequences awaited Draco. No magic and no Harry already felt like the kind of consequences he couldn't endure for much longer.

No magic was almost more of a gall than the latter, with what he had found himself in possession of, a mirror he kept perpetually on his person sleeping and waking. He wished he could go to Xaphan to bring it near the Mirror of Erised and see the results, not even to mention how much he wanted to check on Gilderoy after the scene witnessed between him and Severus. But Xaphan was flatly forbidden him, and the lack of wand made Remus's decision final. No secret Apparition away from this bedroom, for once.

The mirror looked like the simplest thing, hard to believe it could be the same instrument from the memory, capable of raising Dementors and pulling down the moon from the sky. When Draco had his wand again and some time to himself, he wanted badly to recreate the way Dantanian had carried the mirror, inside a striking dragon pendant, rather than bare and defenseless in one's pocket. But that had to wait, as would any investigation into the powers the mirror could bestow.

At least one would assume. But lacking a wand had little to do with Draco's (Dantanian's) innate skill of pyromancy. There were no bluebell flames in the facsimile of Draco's (Dantanian's) ceiling light display that Remus had provided. But Sirius had surreptitiously given him a set of tapered silver candles in their stead, after extracting a promise to be sure not to burn Grimmauld to the ground.

It was a vow Draco mostly intended to keep. But boredom so often seemed to mean taking risks for him, and in lieu of any other experiment, he would happily take the risk of fire. With trust in his (Dantanian's) control, he was soon lighting candles by match, then picking up handfuls of sunset-colored flames right off the silver wax.

He completed his usual ritual of linking the fire, drawing it back and forth in strings between his palms. Then he left it to float in the air, orange-gold glow from the exponential replication of a single spark soon overwhelming the room's characteristic silver-blue. Heat made the air pulse and wetly distort the scenery behind it, a dreamy haze in front of old Polaroids, which Draco trusted in his (Dantanian's) skills enough not to melt right off the walls. Finally, the reflection of the flames on the plain mirror led Draco to apply the first test he always seemed to throw at these mirrors: destruction.

Except it didn't turn out that way. With the mirror dropped on the center of the floor and flames dropped upon it, what rose from the contact almost seemed water- but no, that crystal-blue alpine clarity belonged more precisely to stronger flame, along with a broader haze of distortion above. Another rivulet of yellowish fire down upon the unchanged mirror, and it poured off it in brighter blue- not the heatless, eerie sterility of a blue Protego Diabolica or

Patronus, but real fire that seared the floor and could have easily gone out of control without a pyromancer's grip upon it.

Draco sat himself beside the site of experimentation without fear. He could only wish Hermione was there as he did what she likely would: experiment. Whatever heat the flame bore, even great compressed gusts of lethal blue-white, seemed to intensify from the mirror, sliding off its smooth surface like blood over an unblunted sword. Whether the fire was large or small in quantity- and Draco tested this at length- or the side of the mirror up, or Draco's personal distance, always the same answer to the question of fire, without any spells involved to prejudice it. Just blue color, and more heat.

The mirror itself, though, did not heat from any of this. Although everywhere around was left dangerously warmed, shimmering with embers, the silver metal was untouched, its inscription and curved reflections delivered to the eye unaltered. He could detect no change in the Mirror of Espilce at all, even after all that, save that- and this might just have been his imagination- perhaps it felt to his fingertips the slightest bit colder.

It was an interesting day to wake up on, June 21, the day Dumbledore died. It was a Saturday, but that meant little in the ascetic purgatorial existence Draco was living here at Grimmauld. Breakfast and lunch by himself, save their serving by a superlatively glowering Kreacher, dinner early with Sirius and Remus come back from Xaphan, rather quiet and grim as always, and Draco with no way to explain the unaccountable anxiety that Saturday's date happened to put in him. Well, if Dumbledore died tonight, it wouldn't be because of Draco this time.

Draco managed to tire himself out regardless, though, with further experimentations with the Mirror of Espilce and fire. He felt unaccountably exhausted after his labors of testing, so he dragged himself to bed for a well-earned nap.

He was woken by lips to his forehead, not kissing but slowly drawing across it, warm breath like a benediction. They could be no one's lips but the ones he loved the most. "Harry," he breathed, and so it was. He heard his own name issue in return, startled, from that beloved mouth, as if not expecting him to wake so soon. Then their faces were close, Harry leaning over him and staring down as if Draco had unveiled some secret to him.

"It's been a while," Harry said softly, "I missed you. We all did."

"I wish it could always be you to wake me up," Draco said drowsily. "You look sleepy too. Maybe you should lie down here with me." It was an unduly suggestive way to speak to a boy he had sworn to give all the time and space he needed to figure things out. But in Draco's defense, he wasn't totally sure this wasn't a dream. It happened to feel like one.

"Don't tempt me, dragon," Harry sighed, looking less vexed by Draco per se than by his own desire to crawl into the warm, drowsy bed and not come out. Once lured in, Draco could think of some ways to keep Harry there without magic, ways to draw him underwater and make him never want to surface. Harry was the one who shouldn't be tempting him, waking him from dreams of Harry with lips on his face.

"Aren't you meant to be at Hogwarts?" Draco sighed reluctantly. "Unless this really is a dream... in which case I'd like to formally thank my subconscious..."

"It's not a dream," Harry laughed, face gone flushed, set off attractively by the red in that Gryffindor tie that Draco wanted to wind around his hand and not let go. "I made enough of a nuisance of myself about wanting to talk to you, I guess Professor Dumbledore eventually took pity on me. The headmaster has a task for me, but first, he sent me here to talk to you. Not long, though. I'm just meant to deliver the news."

Draco thought about asking, *Do you have time to get your cock sucked on your way out?* But no, he would be good. He sat up and obligingly prompted, "News?" News from Hogwarts was liable to contain information about his fate.

Harry's eyes fastened on Draco's bare torso so keenly, it was like *looking* at Draco was one of the major things he'd been missing. "News. Right. I should just spit it out, shouldn't I?" He pushed up his glasses and leaned forward, managing with a valiant effort not to direct all his words directly to Draco's chest. "You're not going to be expelled."

Draco shuddered theatrically. "I should hope not. I hoped that wasn't a *serious* possibility." But Harry just bit his lip and shrugged, and Draco realized, *I really did go beyond the pale this time, didn't I?* "Like Hagrid? Come on, with the war on, would they ever have seriously expected me to meekly submit to having my wand snapped? Or even if I did agree, that they could succeed at it, with *this* wand?"

"That might be why you're not expelled, that's what Hermione says," Harry said logically, "Just suspended," and Draco heaved a sigh of relief. "Even if it sounds pretty similar, Ron says. Like expelling you without the wand-snapping part." Draco raised his eyebrows, and Harry's brow creased in sympathy. "It's for at least till the end of semester. Then, well, 'indefinitely' was the word used. I didn't like the sound of that. But they brought in all this stuff about your prior activities like this... you know, when you made the Naufragiam for me, and when you and me went off to Gringotts to the Lestrange vault without permission and all..."

"It's okay." If things went anything like they had in the blue loop, there wouldn't be much of a Hogwarts to be banned from by next year. "I guess I won't have to take my exams. Probably for the best, given how little work I really have put in on anything this semester except for Dantanian and Nurmengard."

Harry looked more affronted than Draco, on his behalf. "Anyway, you're allowed back just for tonight, to get your things and all. I've already told Sirius and Remus. That's why I'm here in person, to escort you. I don't think they trust you to go places on your own anymore." They likely suspected- not without merit- that if Draco was left to his own devices, he was likely to stop at Xaphan on his way over at an absolute minimum.

"You're a good escort to choose," Draco sighed affectionately. "Somehow nothing sounds very bad if it's you saying it. I missed you too. Rather catastrophically, you know."

Harry laughed, rubbing his hand behind his cute head in shy, abashed pleasure. "I bet what you really missed is this." He reached his other hand into his pocket and withdrew the talon

wand.

"It didn't hurt you!" Draco marveled, and took it from Harry with great enthusiasm. "Nice Dantanian," he said lightly, and kissed the end of the wand.

"You love that thing more than me," Harry joked, but Draco chose to take him seriously.

"No," Draco said, meeting his eyes. "No, I really don't."

It was some time after that when Harry finally dropped his gaze.

Sirius and Remus made no great production of their goodbyes, merely emphasizing that they expected him back tonight, not tomorrow. He was not to spend the night in Ravenclaw, however happy he may find himself to be reunited with Luna. Or how adamant she was of her right to spend time with *Cousin.*

So the Portkey Harry had brought was whirling Draco back to Hogwarts before he knew it, just barely in time for Draco to properly dress himself in the Hogwarts uniform he no longer had the right to wear. The Portkey took them to McGonagall's office, who greeted them with precisely the right amount of warmth before shooing them off. In turn, Draco made the walk to Ravenclaw escorted like a prisoner, albeit with the most pleasant possible guard. All he could think about, though, was the look in Harry's eyes when Draco had said he didn't love the talon wand more than Harry.

"I've been waiting," he said conversationally as they walked, sure Harry would know what he was talking about. "And I'm not saying I won't wait. I'd wait a damned long time, if that's what it takes. I'm just saying, I'm not waiting *patiently*."

Harry sounded both reluctant and relieved as he told him, "I really have been thinking. And we'll talk, but Dumbledore really did want me back quickly, like it's urgent." His ears were very red.

He ended up promising he would talk to Draco as much as he wanted, once he came back home for summer. Draco told himself it would be a yes. As it should be, given that Draco wasn't sure if he could live with himself if it was still a no, and it turned out he'd somehow managed to throw away any remaining time they would have had left.

Harry lingered at the door to Ravenclaw, waiting for Draco to answer the riddle. "What, did Dumbledore tell you to make sure I went straight here?" he joked, but Harry just solemnly nodded.

"Oh!" Harry said suddenly. "I forgot! The headmaster wanted me to thank you for passing on Grindelwald's gift. Do you know what that means?"

"Yes," Draco said, heart briefly warmed by the apparent success of his lie. "Yes, I know what it means."

"A person awakens with two husbands. How do they decide a rightful husband?" asked the Ravenclaw eagle.

"Kill them both and marry a third," Draco said promptly, and the knocker, with an air of righteous affront, let him inside.

Draco wanted to part from Harry with a kiss, but didn't even manage a kiss to the cheek once he'd taken a step inside the ordained threshold to Ravenclaw. There must have been something uniquely urgent to Dumbledore's orders, because he only got a tight grin from Harry before he nodded to him and sprinted away.

He found the spacious, airy common room full of Ravenclaws, none of whom seemed over-pleased to see the student who had lost them 300 points personally. Another lesser pariah would presumably have been Luna, for the 50 points as well as by association, but she was nowhere in sight, nor did anyone have news to impart of her whereabouts. They all looked as though they'd sooner spit on him than help him, granted, but he did manage to ascertain she wasn't in her dorm, and likely not in the tower. *Probably with Longbottom*, said one of her yearmates, and for the sake of expediency in obeying Harry's orders, Draco pretended not to notice the face the girl made at the comment.

After he'd made a nuisance of himself asking after his cousin, Draco passed the remaining students quickly, trying not to look them in the eye, Cho Chang most of all. At least when he arrived in his dorm, none of his dormmates were inside.

He wasn't sure whether that was by chance, or whether they'd gotten the message Draco was back and cleared out. Maybe to avoid him, maybe to give him space, but either way, Draco was guiltily grateful for the chance to pack up alone. Ravenclaw had been good to *him*, but other than with Luna, he hadn't really laid down roots here, had he?

As if he'd laid down anything this year but plots to end up in him committing more murders...

Pop.

It was Dobby, and Draco was naive enough to smile at the sudden appearance, grateful for a friendly face. But Dobby's face was frantic and strained. "Dobby," Draco said, smiling slowly, "I'm glad you're not in trouble, I hope you're not angry I got you involved in all that-"

"Luna Lovegood has sent Dobby," Dobby blurted out. "Draco Black must come now. Draco Black must be coming with Dobby now!"

"Are you alright?" Draco said in alarm. "What's going on?"

"Draco Black must be going now!" Dobby exclaimed, and began to pull Draco by the hand out of his dorm.

"But why?"

"Because," Dobby said, marble eyes huge with fear, "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened."

Cadaunuptium

Chapter Notes

Playlist

It was the Wheel of Hecate, drawn across the floor of Myrtle's bathroom in human blood, and the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets was open. The stars were done in elegant seven-pointed form. A meticulous hand had distributed the blood.

"You were right," Draco said. "She was right. The Death Eaters are going to try and use this to get into Hogwarts?" Dobby nodded anxiously. "And she went on ahead? What was she *thinking*?"

"Luna Lovegood," Dobby said wobblingly, "Is seeming very upset about the Chamber of Secrets, and when she was being there before. Dobby is not knowing if..."

Draco wanted to scream at Dobby for not stopping her somehow, but he had done the right thing, going to Draco first once Luna headed into the Chamber. The wheel below Draco's feet was something he avoided stepping on, avoided wondering whose blood made up its great circle and snake whirls and stars.

"It's okay, Dobby," Draco said, forcing a smile. "Just go and get the others, okay? Harry and everyone, have them come now-" He remembered Harry's field trip or whatever with Dumbledore and cursed nastily at himself. "Or- if you can't find Harry, all the rest of the Gryffindors, alright? Go!"

Dobby raced out, and Draco turned to face the prospect of the Chamber of Secrets alone. Dobby had also had the presence of mind to summon a broom for Draco to travel down faster- a school one, since his own Firebolt had been burned- so this should go better than the stumbling way in he had made with Ron and Harry, in second year. Besides, the Basilisk was dead, slain so beautifully by Harry's hand and sword. The monsters Draco had to fear down inside the shadowy pipes should be entirely human.

Draco took a deep breath, dragging the broom with him, and made the descent.

His feet knew the way to the center of the Chamber of Secrets, so easily that he wondered at their speed through the shadowy flicker and muck, until he recognized the dazed feeling threatening him as onirical. He had been dreaming of the Chamber of Secrets this year, hadn't he, or at least at the start of it...

He had dreamed of the Chamber filled with the mutilated bodies of all nine names.

He hadn't thought he'd find this place menacing again, after so much he'd been through in the intervening years. But then, last time, he hadn't been alone. And he and Ron had Harry to hide behind... well, if not Harry, Ron and Hermione, Neville and Ginny, they'd all be here soon, right behind him...

He told himself that.

He ran so quickly down the hall towards the statue, his feet threatened to skid, but he barely registered the wrenches of near-slips, mind dumbly repeating Dobby's words, *The Chamber of Secrets has been opened for the Death Eaters to come in*, and *Luna Lovegood is going into the Chamber of Secrets alone.* They overlay in his mind with the Wheel of Hecate and each treacherous seven-pointed star, once virtually his symbol now turned against him, as he should have known Hecate well might in the end...

Past the shed snakeskin, no different, there was the corpse of the Basilisk laid out across the floor of the Chamber, great and scaled and gleaming, its gaping maw with its venomous fangs left dead and open. There was the statue of Salazar Slytherin, a worse likeness every time Draco saw it. There was no small light-haired body at the foot of the statue. But it still did not fail to strike Draco, how much it felt he had seen all of this exactly before. Maybe Draco should have gone with Dobby to get the others, but if Luna had gone alone ahead before all of them, he wasn't about to leave her alone against the Death Eaters for a second longer than necessary. So now Draco stood alone in the Chamber of Secrets, looking for Luna, and did not find her. But there was someone waiting for him, and that was where the déjà vu came in.

It was a strikingly handsome young man in a Slytherin Hogwarts uniform, wand in hand, wearing an air of arrogance like armor and threat, beside the statue of Slytherin wearing its shadow over his angular face with those striking eyes. It was Tom Riddle for the briefest moment, as Draco rounded the corner and raced inside.

Then Draco's eyes focused and it was who it obviously was, who he should have known from every dream would be waiting here, only here, to bring matters to their natural close:

Just as at the gates of Nurmengard, Theodore Nott was there waiting for him.

"Where is Luna?" Draco barked, a tremble in his voice already.

Theo's intelligent deep blue eyes focused on him thoughtfully, none of the furor in Draco's voice reflected in his calm supercilious demeanor. "Calm down, Draco," Theo said, and leaned back against the side of the statue as if to display his lack of urgency. His body was a graceful arch there, more imposing than Tom Riddle in truth had ever been with his aggressive blustering. "Your cousin will be fine."

"WHERE IS LUNA?" Draco screamed, brandishing his wand scarcely a meter from Theo. Theo didn't move a muscle save his lips, which twitched up threatening a smile. He seemed to draw reassurance from Draco's panic, steadied further in his position against ill-carved stone.

"Calm down," Theo said again, "And I'll tell you, Grindelwald, and-"

"Don't call me that!" Draco shrieked, feeling his wand hand spasm, dark sparks escaping into the air. Unlike their confrontation in the graveyard, Theo looked serenely, surreally unafraid of them. "You don't have the right! Not after you-" *After you made me* kill *Grindelwald.*

"You're right. I suppose we're not close enough for nicknames anymore," Theo said reasonably, and Draco felt like he was going mad. "Now please try and listen. You want to understand what's going on here, don't you? What's happened to your cousin? I'm sure that concerns you. Keep your wand up if you like, although our wrists might eventually get sore. I'm not here to hurt or to fight you-"

"What, you're here to, like, defect to our side?" Draco snapped sarcastically. "No! You're a Death Eater, and you got back into Hogwarts after you got expelled, and now you've opened the Chamber because you've found some other entrance outside Hogwarts and you're going to use it to let Death Eaters in to kill Dumbledore-"

Theo laughed aloud, his pretty melodic laugh that had used to be such a reward to win from him. "Is *that* why I opened the Chamber?" Either he had the patience of a saint, or he enjoyed watching Draco be the one to squirm in the dark.

"Stop fucking around and *tell me where my cousin is*!"

"I have something to show you," Theo said soothingly, raising his free hand in placation. "I think once you see it, you'll understand." He went around the side of the statue, and Draco expected him to return with his dagger, Luna, some part of her, he didn't know, but he didn't even guess- he'd had no concept how far he had plunged into the realm of nightmare-

Theo returned wearing a mask. A stag mask. The same that Harry had worn at Halloween, that had once belonged to James Potter.

Draco screamed, hands both flying to his mouth. The tip of the talon wand sizzled at his teeth.

"Do you understand yet?" Theo said intently. "It's very important that you understand, Draco, try and focus, the most important thing for me is that you understand what is happening to you and why. And because of whom. That's what I need to see you realize, Draco Black, how completely you failed everyone you ever cared for, before the end."

"Oh my God," Draco said, taking several stumbling steps back, nearly dropping his wand as his heart exploded in his chest. "That was you. It wasn't just a dream. It really was you behind Harry's mask-"

"He received it at his house table and showed it all around," Theo observed dispassionately. "Not a difficult mask to transfigure a credible replica of, given my skills." He took the mask off and tossed it aside like trash.

"You kissed me," Draco breathed, stomach turning. Theo's eyes rolled elegantly, more like Severus than Tom Riddle in his economic Slytherin show of poise.

"You kissed me," Theo corrected mildly. "Although it hardly matters. Your housemates were so easy to Obliviate when they were that drunk. Even COUSIN!" He imitated Draco's fawning tone of voice perfectly, and some part of the past died, then and there. "You should have trained her up better, for her sake."

Draco wanted to ask about Luna again, but it wouldn't yield anything. Surely the others would be coming soon, if they hadn't gone to alert teachers first- Dumbledore and Harry might be missing, but Severus, McGonagall, the other professors could do something- and one of them would have gone directly to help him, surely just one- and Draco couldn't work out who was stalling, himself or Theo, himself for his friends and Theo for the Death Eaters to arrive.

"You bastard," Draco growled, wanting to throw aside any notion of stalling and rip Theo apart just as brutally as he'd had to rip apart Grindelwald. *As I ripped apart your worthless Death Eater father you love so much*- "You bastard- fucking monster-"

"I," Theo said softly, "Never meant to be a monster. You know what you did, Draco, you know what it meant. Before, I wanted to spend sixth-year doing some writing, and doing extra work to prepare for my NEWTs. I just wanted the Kingsnakes to win another championship. But what you did- it's the reason I'm-"

He held up his left wrist, sleeve slipping to expose the Dark Mark, and looked at it displayed on his own skin with dispassionate contempt.

"I would never have been on their side if I could help it. I still don't care a thing about blood supremacy. But I didn't have a choice. I couldn't let what you did go. I'll never-" Theo's voice threatened to break before he recaptured it, impassivity more of a facade when he spoke of his father. "I'll never betray my father again. I swear it. By Hecate, by my magic, by any god that's real, I swear it."

"Oh, please!" Draco exclaimed, seizing on that bit of weakness and stalking himself and his wand a step closer to that lovely monster. "As if you aren't acting on the orders of your beloved Bellatrix-"

"Beloved, you say?" Theo echoed. "Because of that show she wanted us to make, when we came to kill you at Nurmengard?" His sloping shoulders shrugged carelessly. "I've done what I had to do. Do you think I ever *wanted* to? But she'd been in my head, the summer after you killed my father, teaching me Occlumency. She saw how I- how I used to feel, about you." He rushed through that part as if poisonous. "So I had to prove to her that I wasn't like that anymore, that I would be loyal. How do you think she wanted me to prove that? Astoria sufficed at first, a pretty pureblood girl, young enough to excuse not- but not forever. And then Bella- so- so I've done things I didn't want to, to get here. You can't imagine the things I've done-"

"Right," Draco laughed. "Of course you don't want my Aunt Bella, and not just because you're queer." A rage like he had never known filled his lungs like bile. *All for his father, his stupid father who never understood him to begin with! He threw everything away, so much intelligence, talent,* goodness*, all that future he could have had, he threw it away for that!* "Because you're still in love with me, aren't you, you pathetic piece of shit!"

He advanced that final distance between them and seized Theo by the green and silver tie, pushing Theo against the statue to get into his face menacingly. He felt Theo's wand jab against his ribcage, which was just fine. He put his own wand right under Theo's chin, against the sharp bridge of his hewn jawline, where he had used to like to kiss, in a different lifetime. "That's why you have to kill me, isn't it? Because I killed your father and you still can't get me out of your head, you stalker, huh? Go ahead, make that face, you know it's true, I know you, Theo- I know you were following me around, and-"

"I won't try and argue," Theo said softly, "Your previous point, one way or another. Only, to address your final point, Draco..." He licked his lips, tilted his head, breath hot on Draco's cheek, like something burning right beneath his fingers, not pliable like real fire but becoming harder and harder to touch. "I was following you because I was tasked with discovering what you and your cousin had done to the Dark Lord."

Theo's eyebrow arched as Draco let him go. "Didn't you ever wonder how he learned about the Naufragiam? You had the book right out there, on Halloween. I had suspected before, but that made me sure. Interesting book, isn't it?"

"Theo, you-" Draco tried to speak, but he had to try hard, through a throat tying itself in knots. He wanted some draught of peace, but he'd already drank his draught today. If he tried to drink the one vial in his pocket, he'd be imbibing liquid Fiendfyre. Even if that was rather what it felt like to face Theo. "You win, alright? You- you're smarter than me, you've proven it, you've won, can we please just stop this, this Death Eater act, alright, just be Theo again-"

"When my father died," Theo said, enunciating every word loud and clear, so there could be no mistake, "I went to Bellatrix Lestrange. Yes, I did. *I* contacted *her.* Because I knew you feared her more than anyone in the world. I asked her to Nott Manor. I asked her to help me send a Black Dagger. I asked her to train me that summer, and not just in Occlumency, to keep my secrets. Do you know who's *acting* here, Draco? *I* asked Bellatrix Lestrange to train me to kill you."

"I'm sorry." Draco nearly fell to his knees, so impossible it felt to look Theo in the eye anymore, his show of bravado had gone up in smoke. "I'm so sorry, Theo, I haven't said it enough- if I had just said it more, maybe-"

"Except when I got to Hogwarts," Theo said, calm restored as Draco dissolved into self-recrimination, "And we dueled, I knew I didn't have any chance in the world. I could sooner," he gestured ruefully to the corpse beside them, "Slay a Basilisk. That would be the easier Kingsnake. So I decided to go through with what Bellatrix wanted, and give her the information on the Naufragiam."

It was all whirling through Draco's head, the ways this could have been averted, the times he should have forced his way back into Theo's life, to talk, to scream, to hurt, to beg if necessary, to avert this. Anything and everything he could have done that he hadn't. "It was you- Periander and Maledictum's grave."

"It was kind of you to lead me to the corpse of a Maledictus. I needed one."

"The message you wrote- you said my godfather was a liar-"

"Bellatrix suspected him from the start, that's why she wouldn't ever let him hear about me. It was her idea. To leave the note on Valentine's Day to mess with you. I didn't want to. I didn't want to dig up Maledictum, either. Believe me, I never saw my life ending up in grave-robbing. I'd have preferred academia."

"And you got the mission then," Draco said miserably, "To get Death Eaters into Hogwarts, to kill Dumbledore." He remembered this wasn't the blue loop, remembered the Naufragiam that had proved so vital here. "And to take Hogwarts, for Voldemort, so he would stop dying from his absence. You were in too deep, and they made you-"

"No!" Theo exclaimed, with another soft sweet laugh. He reached between them and gently lifted Draco's wand up in the air higher for him, as if helping him keep up his guard. The talon wand did not seem to burn him, although Draco saw black smoke rise in the air. "No, they wanted me to kill you, of course."

"You said-" Draco tried to make his mind work, past all the pity and fear and the terror for Luna he had almost forgotten in her absence. Where were the others, anyway? When would they come and save him from this phantom? "You said you weren't here to hurt me, to fight me-"

"Theodore Nott," a voice said from very near them, but below, "Is a very kind man. And he is never being a liar."

Dobby walked up to Draco and Theo and the statue, with Nissy the house elf at his side. Draco's mouth opened and no sound came out. Again, he could have fallen to his knees, at the depth of the betrayal. But this time not his own.

"Dobby," Draco breathed. "Why haven't you brought everyone else- why is she-"

"Draco Black," Dobby said firmly, "Is deserving to die."

"Dobby?" Draco whimpered, stepping further back from the other three. The house elves stepped to either side of Theo's, flanking him like perfect servants. "Dobby, no, it's not possible..."

"Amusing as you must find this," Theo said to Dobby, "It must be wearing off in any moment, no?"

"Yes," Dobby sighed, and sat down where he stood.

What felt like an infinity later, in reality less than a minute of waiting and changing altogether, and Dobby changed from himself into Wooky the house elf, Nissy's brother. The two siblings, once Parkinson elves, acknowledged each other with nervous but triumphant smiles. Wooky quickly removed the long Ravenclaw hoodie Dobby had been wearing, down to only a sack beneath, as if it had felt unnatural and offended him thoroughly to wear real clothes. That was not a house elf that wanted to be free.

"Master Theo," Wooky said, "Wooky is doing a good job pretending to be Dobby?"

Polyjuice. Draco could have wept from the simplicity of it, and how easily he'd fallen for it. Dobby had never been Dobby, summoning him to the Chamber of Secrets, which meant...

"Is Luna even here? Did she *ever* come here?"

They ignored Draco for an almost tender reunion. "Yes, Wooky, Nissy, you have both done excellently," Theo said, and patted both elves' heads kindly. "Clever, and above and beyond the call of duty. You will both be full members of the Nott household, and serve me from this day forward. And I am the one thankful, for your devotion, when so much else had been taken from me."

He turned back to Draco, with a look more bemused than gloating. "Didn't you ever wonder how I knew about your trips to Nurmengard? Dobby's old friends followed him every time. It's actually not hard, for house elves to follow each other's Apparition trails. They got me in to eavesdrop, the day you broke out Grindelwald. I thought you might have assumed already, from how much time I spent with Pansy. She's the one who convinced them to help me, so they could find a new household to serve."

"Wait," Draco said, a new horror filling his mind. "Millie- when I saw Nissy- Nissy, you were spying on her practicing, you said just because you missed the Kingsnakes- but that was for-"

"We is knowing everything," Nissy said contemptuously, "About Millicent Bulstrode."

"I haven't told on Millie," Theo soothed him. "Just made sure not to tell her anything useful. I don't ever want her hurt. I hope she won't be tonight. I hope she'll do the smart thing if she has to, and at least act like she's with the winning side."

"Tonight," Draco echoed numbly. "The winning side."

"Tonight," Nissy cried in utter ecstasy, "Hogwarts is falling!"

Theo turned to her affectionately. "I was getting to that part."

"Nissy is sorry, Master Theo," Nissy said sheepishly, and Theo patted her head again.

"No harm, no harm. I want him to know, I did let Death Eaters in. The Chamber happened to have a secret escape route out of Hogwarts. Your aunt Bellatrix has been through here already. So have all of her compatriots. So has Dark Lord himself. He walks the floors of Hogwarts above you as we speak, the halls where your friends wait for him." Theo's lips finally crooked up into a smile. "See, I told you I would say where your cousin was. She's up there in Hogwarts, for the Dark Lord to kill."

"If," Nissy said with a snarl, "That simple-minded little girl is being *lucky.*"

Draco turned on his heel and took one, two running steps away, towards where he'd left the school broom in the hallway outside, towards his fastest way to avert a scene he had already known in the blue loop, a scene that once again it seemed he had been instrumental in bringing to life. Perhaps Hagrid's hut was already burning. And when Harry and Dumbledore returned-

"I've asked Bellatrix," Theo said, voice cutting into Draco's retreat, "As a personal favor, to be sure to eliminate your treacherous godfather. So you'll know what it's like to lose your real father."

"He is escaping, Master Theo!" Wooky called worriedly, and Theo's pretty laugh carried throughout the Chamber of Secrets.

"He's not going anywhere," Theo said, and withdrew a dagger from his pocket. The moonstones on the hilt glimmered like a thousand imploded moons. The hilt was colored a gathering of garnets. It was Pammaque Periander's dagger, and from the blood red that dripped at its end, Theo had put the ritual dagger to its intended purpose. "He escaped at Nurmengard, but not tonight. I said I wouldn't fight him. *I* won't. But here is the place he will die." He knelt down, smoothing his robes below himself with his unbloodied hand, and pushed the dagger into the floor. "Cadaunuptio!"

Theo spoke, and the blinded corpse moved.

The Basilisk's corpse was of a great mass like a dragon, coiled around itself motionless, which twitched at the sound. Then, slow as nightmare, the head with the scratched-out Medusa eyes lifted, and turned towards the sound of Theo's voice. Theo approached it fearlessly, pocketing what was now his dagger. "Close your jaws," Theo ordered, no hissing necessary, and the great beast closed them.

"Be still. Stay," Theo said, as if he spoke to a well-trained dog, and the corpse of the Basilisk obeyed as if not just ensorcelled but made a marionette, snout sloping down to let Theo pet up its great mass. "Good. Good. *Beloved*." Theo turned to look at the frozen, transfixed Draco, and his face broke into a wide grin. "Hey, Ravenclaw? What do you call a snake who eats other snakes?"

"A Kingsnake," Draco said dully, sheer wonder keeping his feet glued to the floor. He saw himself sprinting for the nearest exit and his broom, but only in his mind's eye. And his broom- he hadn't left it right at the entrance to the central chamber, and even if he had, wouldn't it be easier for the Basilisk to get him in the air-

"And who is the King of Serpents? The king of all snakes?"

"The Basilisk," Draco filled in obligingly, understanding Theo's small cruelty. "The Kingsnake."

"Don't look at me like that," Theo laughed, although he flinched aside a little as the Basilisk's rotted tongue flicked out beside his hand. The full coiled fifty feet of the beast shifted behind him, prepared to move at his command. "It was your idea. And I found the way in your book. Thank you, Draco. It's all thanks to you, from start to finish. Now. My Kingsnake." Theo closed his eyes a long moment, as if even now he had to work to get out the words, but come out they did all the same. "Kill him for me."

The blinded corpse turned to Draco, and attacked.

Just because it no longer had a gaze that poisoned didn't mean its fangs weren't still lethally venomous. Those fangs lashed towards Draco as the corpse lunged for him, just as Theo had commanded. It was Draco's legs rather than his mind that gave the signal to move, jerking away just in time.

Even Theo would likely not have wanted it to be over *that* quickly.

Draco sprinted for a pillar to hold onto, even the most superficial barrier to give him the chance not to have to focus on dodging. He swerved aside again and ran, panic already an acid clogging his lungs, immediately like he had been running for a very long time. He couldn't turn his back for long on the creature, though. He had to try and calculate the speed that monstrous mass of coils could roll the venomous head forward, to lash out towards his fleeing figure. He felt it so close, he could feel its slavering rotting breath on the back of his neck.

Desperate glances back showed that the underside of the dead thing was disintegrated, open and rotting dead flesh, rotten in places down to the bone, so much it hardly should be moving by itself. It was like not just Theo's words but his will propelled the slithering of the snake, the sheer fixation on seeing Draco die.

Draco had never regretted what he'd done more than in that moment. He dove behind a second pillar like a desperate jump for the Snitch. Merlin, he had never been sorrier to have said Sectumsempra instead of Stupefy for Mr. Nott, as he surged around the pillar and cried out Avada Kedavra, a green light flashing out and hitting the beast right in its mouth.

The wound from the Sword of Gryffindor was still there in the bone-dry pink-brown mutilated flesh, of the open desiccated mouth, half-shredded tongue by the strike flicking through the air. It was as undeterred as if the curse had just been a burst of pretty light, a show for its benefit, and one it was hardly well-equipped to appreciate with its eyes half-pecked out. The Killing curse had used to feel such a momentous monstrous thing to issue from his lips was let out once, twice, thrice, without any tangible result save the light, all the more so once the head sprung at Draco again and hit the pillar sideways, spraying shattered stone.

Draco's eyes erupted with stinging pain from just the dust in the air, as the beast demolished the pillar Draco had hidden behind as if personally incensed with it. It lashed out with its tail to batter the thing to bits as it turned to keep after him.

Of course the Killing curse doesn't work, you fool, the thing's already dead.

"Sectumsempra!" Draco caught the snake in its side, with a force that should have ripped through scales and instead rebounded off them, driving deep gauges in the stone where the Basilisk had been without doing a thing to penetrate the carapace-like surface. Draco shot another Sectumsempra, but it died completely on the scales as it hit more squarely this time, and then he really began to believe he was about to die.

One part of his mind searched Severus's lessons this year, desperately trying to remember how you killed Inferi, the closest thing he could think of- but of course, this year when it came to academics, he had never paid attention. How did you kill what was already dead?

The more realistic part of Draco was already telling himself that come the worst, he'd never heard anything about a Basilisk eating their prey alive- that was, unless it was ordered to-

Nine names, he had his nine names, nine or more, he couldn't die here when he still had those names-

Theo, Theo was just watching this, watching a monster circle and try again and again to sink its fangs in Draco. It came all the closer each time as Draco was worn down, legs tiring and turning to lead with their lack of constant Quidditch practice to keep them as fit. This time, to keep the fangs back, Draco was brought in his animal terror to that most primal of recourses, fire. Fire burst from Draco's wand to just keep the mouth back from him.

That was all it seemed to do, keep the snake back like great invisible hands, sliding over the scales like water in broken reflections. It turned the open underside blackened with embers, but the damage seemed unfelt. Nothing could shake this unnatural thing hellbent on Draco's destruction, and that was what Theo had wanted. Theo wanted this of all the ways to be the way he died, not quick like his father had died but running for his life, helpless and terrified, fleeing a dead body he couldn't kill, couldn't even dent. This was what it meant to have Theodore Nott as an enemy. This was all by Theo's design.

In sheer desperation, Draco tried a spell he had invented, gasping Verniculpa, the bloody-handed spell, to make the thing at least bleed. Then he remembered snakes didn't have hands. But it produced blood nonetheless, a massive bursting river out from the places fire had touched underneath. It was likely not the creature's blood- Draco had never understood whose blood the curse brought, even after he'd taught it to Luna, had never figured the invention out- because it had never been his, the memory had shown it had just been Dantanian's- Dantanian who had abandoned him now-

The beast slid, the front of its coils slipping in the sticky red pool over shattered stone. But Draco was slipping too, shoes skidding. He could never have imagined so much blood.

The Basilisk thrashed, end flashing out, and its tail caught Draco and made him fly. He was smashed through the air, into a wall dozens of meters away.

He immediately tried to stand once his reddened vision of the world was upright again. The snake had driven him further away, but it was coming. He couldn't stand- he was watching himself try and fail, the wind knocked completely out of him. The feeling was driven out of his legs, all of his nerves centered in the bloody murder of pain his back screamed since it struck stone. And even that was nothing to the pain in his right hip, which hurt like nothing he'd ever felt save the Cruciatus curse. It had to be broken.

His only comfort was the talon wand still in his hand, the thought it could protect him somehow, here where he knelt drenched in no one's blood. Dantanian would save him, pray to a ghost to keep him from the fangs of the snake-

His hip wasn't broken. He had just landed against metal in his pocket, metal he always kept on him. It was the Mirror of Espilce, unsurprisingly still unbroken. It was Draco's reflection that seemed the cracked part, as he withdrew it with trembling hands. Just like the first time

he'd ever seen this little mirror, it was barely recognizable covered in blood- blood, he thought, *blood-*

Blood.

Fire.

He raised his wand to the beast and screamed, "Dracosanguis!" He couldn't tell if it did a thing, but then, he couldn't waste a second wiping blood from his eyes, or pushing back the slick sweat-blood-soaked hair fallen in them as he knelt with the talon wand in one hand, leveled at the beast, the Mirror of Espilce in the other hand, calling out, "Dracosanguis!"

No, he couldn't see fire, but he could feel it, feel the thrum he had before, playing with this mirror as it was leveled at flames, already set, burning them hotter. He could hear a sudden hissing from the snake. He couldn't know if the blood in what had been veins in the corpse was still pumping and liquid, or dried to powder, like gunpowder in his imagination. But whatever it was, the Mirror of Espilce focused on it, his pyromancy and all his power through it as he chanted that word Dracosanguis, that prayer to Dantanian- to the memory of Dantanian- to himself-

"Dracosanguis!" Draco screamed, and the snake stopped its forward motion and writhed crazed, a fearsome sight. Finally, he understood it wasn't just inside the Basilisk but all the blood spurted out from Verniculpa burning too. It was all the blood in the world near Draco that wasn't on him or his own. Merlin, it felt like a fire in his blood, the thought, *I'm hurting it, I'm actually hurting it. I could kill it this way. I could see Harry again.*
"DRACOSANGUIS!"

He could pause for a moment to clear his vision. When he did, the Basilisk was no longer recognizable as such. It was come to a halt, with blue-white fire seething not just all over its scales but inside it. *If you can't kill what's already dead, you destroy the body.* Draco began anew, chanting Dracosanguis as his mantra, as quickly as he could, to build every fire fuller and hotter inside and out. He had gotten underneath the carapace at last, feeling the sparks within and pulling with his mind and the heavy weighted tug of the talon wand in the air. He pulled back, towards himself, like he was trying to lure all the fire he made right to his hands, ripping through every bit of matter in its way in the process.

Flame appeared between them, a sharp forked blue shine of the burning tongue hissing and hissing like its dead lungs could choke on their own smoke. Smoke was rising everywhere, up from the corpse, from the end of his wand towards it where they were bound by it, the black inky thick evil smoke of the talon wand. But it was cut through everywhere by the moonstone-bright scintillation of the Mirror of Espilce, finally tearing open the scales from beneath and letting up great smoking flickering bursts and pillars of fatal light.

It was a kind of trance, the killing of the dead, because Draco was casting Dracosanguis for some time long after the mountain of charred remains had stopped moving.

Somehow it was Wooky and Nissy who reacted more quickly, to the sight of their prey become predator. Theo just stared in motionless horror at what limped around the wall the corpse had made from his vision, coming towards him. Maybe that was for the covering

blood and ash, and maybe it was just for the survival of the boy he had sent the undead beast of the Chamber of Secrets to kill, only to find it overcome and replaced by a new beast. Wooky and Nissy, though- say this much for the little traitors to Dobby- brought their hands up to cast elf magic to protect their new master.

But Draco had been ready for that. With all those laughing summer afternoons practicing dueling with Sirius, those evenings with the Rat Thieves, he had the reflexes to be faster than them. He cast Serpensmorta on one and then the other- give them their own snakes to play with, it was only fair- which pulled them away from Theo, to the sides, where Draco could forget their existence. That left Theo stumbling back from Draco, drawing his wand from his pocket with a hopeless look already in his unfathomably beautiful blue eyes...

The red light of Draco's Expelliarmus sent Theo's wand right into Draco's grasp. He'd already pocketed the Mirror of Espilce, so he caught the wand neatly and pocketed that beside it. The word that came from Draco's mouth then, though, was not one of the ones Theo must have feared, like an Unforgivable or Sectumsempra, but simply, "Legilimens!"

For all the training he had supposedly sold his soul to get from Bellatrix Lestrange, Theo's mind was easy to break into, still easier than it would have been then to cut him open.

Death Eaters walking past the blinded corpse towards the corpse-to-be of Hogwarts that awaited them, as yet unmoving, a long dark line of them murmuring to one another, eyeing Theo with fearful respect as they went. Only Bellatrix approaching him- one would almost wonder why Theo's father did not break ranks as well to congratulate his son, before remembering the man was dead- only Bellatrix, who came up and kissed him on the cheek with a murmur of affection that Theo took with a convincing smile and an inward shudder-

"You did, you really did it," Draco said, pulling from Theo's mind sharply before he could be sucked into anything he didn't want to see. "You really let Death Eaters into Hogwarts this way." It hadn't just been an idle boast to torment Draco before his end. There really were enemies inside, gone after everyone Draco needed to survive- with a special dispensation for his godfather- every second here was a second one of them could be tortured or dying-

A wandless Theo tried to run, understandably enough. "Locomotor mortis," Draco cast, then stalked the few meters Theo had managed to put between them and stood over him again. Theo managed to roll onto his back after falling on his face, those ever-kissable lips now split open from the fall on stone. He tried to drag himself backwards with just his hands, blue eyes wide as his horrified open mouth stayed silent, as if he was already sure what Draco was going to do to him now-

What was to be done with Theo? The Death Eaters were in Hogwarts, there was no taking prisoners now, not without giving him right back to the other side-

"You'll never give up, will you," Draco said, barely a question. "Not until me and everyone I love is dead, at your hand. You'll never stop."

If I let you live.

Theo stared at him for a long moment, visibly suppressing a whimper of pain, and tried to brace himself on the stone. Draco cast a wordless Manibipiscatus that had his wrists pinned above his head too, as immobilized as if Draco had cast Incarcerous on him. An effective captive.

"Will you stop?" Draco said, and his voice came out pleading.

"No," Theo said softly where he lay helpless, eyes closing for a moment before he made the effort to force himself to meet Draco's gaze, looking him right in the eye. "No, I won't. I could try and lie, but you could just break into my mind and see it's not true. I can't. I can't betray my father again. I'm sorry."

"And do you love me?" Draco asked in barely stifled horror, and Theo's gaze was unwavering, like it was being burned onto the back of Draco's eyelids, forever inscribed there, indelible.

"Yes," Theo said, with a visible shudder. "Yes, Draco, I love you."

Draco couldn't look into those eyes.

"Sectumsempra," Draco said, and Theo's helpless body was torn in half, from face to the heart in his chest.

After, Draco could only make himself look long enough to take the wand and the stolen dagger from the body. He saw a patch of bloodied Slytherin robes, no more. It was all he had to see.

It was only after Draco had gone to the hall and retrieved his broom that he saw there was not one but three dead bodies waiting for him. Wooky and Nissy lay dead and cold in the grasp of still-writhing snakes, all the air long since throttled out of them.

Draco mounted his broom before he reached into his pocket and withdrew the Fiendfyre. He was a pyromancer. He no longer feared Fiendfyre. Not at all. He did not feel as though he would ever fear anything ever again.

As Draco flew out of the Chamber of Secrets, he threw the liquid Fiendfyre behind him. It shattered over the bodies and consumed them, but he didn't turn back.

The Fall of Hogwarts

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco had very little idea how he ended up in Ravenclaw Tower, nor how he ended up in the shower there, trying to wash off some of the guilt. Nor did he think very much about it, save for the thought that kept resonating through his head, echoing and inexorable: at least I know now, who out of Orpheus and Eurydice should be the one to climb back out of hell.

It was not the best place to be during an invasion of Hogwarts, huddled up frantically trying to scrape off every remnant of blood and ash. But better he fall into the hands of the enemy- Mirror of Espilce included- what sympathy he felt now for Grindelwald, hiding it in his chest cavity- better he be taken than having to see the look in Harry's green eyes, if he ever understood what Draco had just done. Better anything, come hellfire and hellwater, than that Harry ever know. Yes, Draco had sworn to be open with Harry, to show him his true self. But hadn't Draco always been a liar?

No, Harry would never know, nor Severus, nor- Merlin, nor would Hermione. Or at least Draco wouldn't be there to see them learn it.

"It wasn't your fault," a voice said in his ear from behind him, a voice too silky and precisely weighted to ever mistake for Harry's, even though the feeling of a male body sliding into place behind him should only have belonged to Harry. But there it was, the voice whose identity he knew all too well, along with the slender body and delicate touch snaking around him. He knew who it was come to comfort him, and tell him, "It was my fault, little dragon. It was all my fault."

"Dantanian?" Draco breathed, and felt the lips against his ear break into a soft smile.

"You didn't kill Theodore Nott. Or Wooky, or Nissy," Dantanian whispered, arms encircling Draco tighter. Even through the pounding of the water, Draco could smell him, redolent of dying flowers. "I did. I killed Theo for you, Opaleye. It was me."

"Draco? Draco, is that you?" Luna's voice was calling out fearfully, from somewhere outside the bathroom. "I hear water..."

Draco exited the shower barefoot in his robe, only to be faced with a wand to his chest. Luna had leapt at him the moment he emerged, and had him pinned back.

She pulled back abashed as soon as she saw it was him, but something in her paranoia was contagious. He caught her with his wet hands by her trembling shoulders, watching the real

terror fade from her face too slowly. "Luna?" he said carefully. "Luna, are you alright?"

"Cousin!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad it's you, and not... Draco, where have you been? I've been looking for you! The Dark Mark's been set over Hogwarts!"

The sinking feeling her face had put in Draco's guts redoubled. His damned treacherous gaze traveled downwards, as if to help her unmask him. He took stock of the bloodied robe he'd left on the bathroom floor as if in the slow motion of a nightmare, and Luna's light-eyed gaze naturally followed. Then her eyes shot elsewhere, and Draco thought she might somehow not have understood, even when she breathed, "You were washing off blood, that's yours." Then he tracked her gaze.

In his haste to throw everything aside and get clean of it, he'd emptied the pockets of his robe entirely. That left the empty draught of peace on the floor, along with his wand and the Mirror of Espilce. And his dagger. It sat there silent and still, yet it was like another living thing in the room with them, with the sinister glint of its moonstone hilt, an object that she knew lost and now somehow recovered. It had been the most beautiful thing he owned, and perhaps it still was, but it was also the ugliest now.

It should not have been there, and yet it was, small and still blood-stained as if it had been plunged repeatedly into someone's torn chest, the telltale weapon. Draco tried not to look at it, wishing he had never taken it with him, except it had felt almost as natural to have by his side as his wand by now. And here it told Luna the question she needed to ask. Was it, *Who did you kill for that dagger?*

"Whose blood is that, Draco?" she asked quietly, which was almost the same question. But Draco could answer her honestly, though it would sound like a lie.

"No one's."

Their staring was punctured by the moment and its terrible context, the reality of the situation of Hogwarts, which Luna began to quickly unfold to him. That was, once the spectacle at their feet was attended to. He got the wand and mirror and dagger out of the way, putting them in his robe pockets first, as if hiding some severed body part from view. Then- "Incendio!" he snapped, and set the bloodied robes alight, turning them and the empty vial quickly to even more of a muddied puddle of black ash. He could feel rather than see Luna flinch at his side, but she didn't say a word as he destroyed the evidence.

Nor did she do anything but help, as he left the bathroom for his old room. She told him through the door as he dressed that Death Eaters had gotten inside Hogwarts somehow, and she'd gotten word of it by the coins that Hermione used to communicate with other DA members. Cho Chang and her friends had run off to help, but Luna had gone to find Draco, and found him absent from his dorm where he was meant to be.

"I don't think it was noticed by anyone else, though," Luna said in an agonizingly careful sort of voice. "Then the word came through from the prefects that we're evacuating Hogwarts. Everyone began running out of the tower, with the prefects all shouting and trying to get them to go in some order..."

Draco nearly tore his vest as he pulled it on. "Evacuating?" he called, realizing how implicitly he'd been relying on his memory of the blue loop to inform him, with the sheer vertigo that met him at this unexpected difference. "*Evacuating*? We're abandoning the castle to them?"

"I don't know," Luna called. "I know the students at least are all supposed to get out... Draco, there's so many of them, I went looking for you and I nearly ran into some..."

Draco tore out of his room fully dressed with a bag over his shoulder, instantly incandescent. "You did what? Luna, you shouldn't be roaming the halls alone if there's loads of Death Eaters about! What were you thinking?"

"I just thought you would have gone to look for your godfather," Luna said petulantly, "So I sneaked over to look in his office, but he wasn't there... no one saw me! And if you had just been where you were supposed to and hadn't- why do you have a bag?"

Grimly, Draco pulled up the heavy tome inside to show her its spine: *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate.* It couldn't have been more familiar to her.

Or as it happens, Theo, but I won't think about him now. I can't. Luna is here because of me, when she says Hogwarts is supposed to be evacuating, and I have to get her out of here unhurt, just think that, Draco, nothing but that- think of needing Luna safe- think it was Dantanian's fault-

Draco was arrested in his brief rush of panicked guilt by a scream. It came from close enough that for a bizarre moment he thought it was Luna, though she was right before him and hadn't opened her mouth. Luna was grabbing him and pulling him out of his room and down the stairs, though, towards the real source of distress: the Ravenclaw common room.

They were inside the great spacious room before Draco knew that either, as if reality had begun to narrow itself to only certain moments of decipherability, where the rest were simply taken up by the fact that he had murdered Theodore Nott. The ever-serene, ever-beautiful visage of Rowena Ravenclaw stared out at a scene before her that should not have been. Here was reality at this moment, expanding out upon him with the urgency of a screaming child: three young Ravenclaws backing away from the leering sneer of an advancing Death Eater. And Draco would have known who it was even if the face wasn't perfectly visible. He could have known him in pitch-blackness just by the sound of the snarl.

"Why aren't you evacuated yet?" Draco bellowed rather insensitively at the first-years, who whirled to stare at him with expressions of mixed guilt and gratefulness.

"We went back to get Sasha's book!" one of the boys exclaimed, and Draco felt the bag on his own hip as a hypocritical weight, given how that was forming in his head as one of scarce few possible cover stories. "When we went to go, it was- waiting at the entrance, he- he-"

"Fenrir Greyback," said Draco, and the words sounded in the air like a bullet.

The werewolf laughed and stalked forward, making the first-years shriek in terror and break into a sprint towards the upperclassmen they clearly saw as their saviors. Draco almost thought they had managed it before he realized that of the first-years arriving to virtually fall

at their feet in relief, one of the boys seizing at Luna's sleeve like she was an angel of salvation, there were only two.

The first-year girl was held back, screeching, a bag with the shape of a large book in it hanging down from her side, where she was pulled into the air by Fenrir Greyback, teeth poised at her young vulnerable neck.

"Ha ha!" went Greyback. "I don't think so, Malfoy! Whatever you're doing in Ravenclaw, you won't take my little prizes from me!"

"Whatever I'm doing in *Ravenclaw*?" Draco echoed, stalling frantically while Luna pushed the two terrified boys behind them. He tried to put his old gut-wrenching fear of the man behind himself, even with Luna at his side who he had watched him threaten so many times, in the blue loop, tried to forget the man's threats then when they resounded in his ears right now as well. "I *am* a Ravenclaw, you cerebrum-deficient-"

Meanwhile, the girl Sasha began to plead senselessly for Greyback to let her go, or just please not to bite her. Draco didn't know whether the children had yet gathered what the man was. Either way, she showed a Ravenclaw's good sense.

"No, you're not," Greyback sneered, shaking the girl Sasha in the air. "You're no Ravenclaw, *Malfoy.* Whatever colors you wear, you're a Slytherin."

"Let the girl go and face me like a man," Draco barked. "Luna, take the first-years and go."

"No!" Luna cried, foiling him, not that Greyback would have gone with it for a second. "No, I won't leave you!"

"Then it seems we're at an impasse," Draco gritted out, advancing footsteps closer to Greyback. The thought suddenly came into his head: *I'm going to kill this man too.* Why wouldn't he? He deserved to die a thousand times more than Theo had, there was nothing good in him to plead for him to live like there had been for Theo that Draco had just ignored. Why shouldn't Draco just kill every enemy now, except then where would the killing stop- was that just what he was now, a reliable generator of dead bodies, with children looking on still begging and crying out their little friend's name-

Their little friend, whose neck was newly imperiled by a showy flourish of Greyback's. "No," Greyback said gloatingly, "We aren't. You don't want to see this child's blood cover the stones of Hogwarts. So I'll be taking your wands now."

"Go ahead!" Luna cried out senselessly. "Take them!" She took her own wand and threw it forward. It hit the side of Sasha, who whimpered, eyes nearly rolling back in her head from the prolonged ordeal, being held in the clutches of the slavering beast. "Draco, give it to him!"

Draco couldn't understand her, except if she had surreptitiously reached behind them to get the cringing first-years' wands to use instead. "Give it to him! Or- he'll kill her," Luna said wide-eyed, and when Draco hesitated, she gave him a hard look that said to trust her. He remembered it from when they had faced the Boggart of Bellatrix Lestrange. So he took his

wand from his pocket and threw it at Greyback and the girl. It landed just short of them, and Greyback let the girl to the ground to lean down and take the wands. He reached to pick them up together, with no more care towards the talon wand than Luna's.

But he couldn't meant to- he wouldn't be that ignorant- no one by now could possibly be that stupid-

He was that stupid.

"ARGH!" Greyback reeled back, screaming at the top of his lungs as a searing sound filled the air and the scent of burnt flesh erupted in Ravenclaw Tower. The talon wand burned at Greyback's hand, as well it might have, handed 'willingly' or not. As it always burned at those who would hurt Draco. Always.

Thank you, Dantanian. Thank you.

Draco had not thought so far ahead as to what would follow, but Luna had. "Verniculpa! Verniculpa!" she cried out, and even after the time spent teaching her, Draco honestly didn't expect it to work, not during the pressure of the moment. But apparently even he hadn't learned what even the Death Lord had failed to reckon at his own peril- never underestimate Draco's cousin.

Both of Greyback's hands filled with blood, the branded one and the one holding Sasha. She slipped from his grip, and Luna darted forward and seized the girl from his slippery red grasp. "Oh my God," the little girl gasped, her long blonde hair spattering with sourceless blood, and Draco reflexively darted back to grab hold of the boys. "Oh my God," said little first-year Sasha, as Greyback screamed and made sounds like retching as his palms bled and ached-

"Draco! Bring them! Help me!" Luna screamed, and Draco gestured the boys forward to run. They ran over to Luna and Draco, where Luna had just seized her wand from the ground, and offered it to Draco. Draco nearly slipped and had a faceful of stone, food skidding hard on dripping blood with the same shoes already half-ruined from the blood of another Verniculpa. But one of the boys caught him, so his leg only slid forward a great bit unnaturally. He stayed upright, whereas Greyback had fallen to the ground howling like the wolf he was, a ghastly sound.

"Do something, he'll follow us!" Luna gasped, gathering the children and beginning to run, and when Draco turned back towards the momentarily helpless figure of Greyback, he could only see the blood on the man's hands...

"DRACOSANGUIS!" Draco screamed, once and for good, every atom of blood on Greyback's palms catching on shimmering blue fire.

The sound of the screams that followed them then from inside Ravenclaw Tower was truly inhuman.

Sasha and one of the boys were both crying as they ran, but their words to Draco as well as Luna were grateful, rather than fear for one of the two monstrous killers that had faced them in their common room that night. They introduced themselves as Sasha, Connor, and Dieter, seeming a set of close friends, to whom each other's survival had meant almost as much to them as their own. "Thank you, Mr. Black, thank you," bawled Sasha, while the boys said the same to their Miss Lovegood. "You saved us all, thank you, thank you..."

Draco let Luna lead them as they ran, though he and the others became progressively tenser at the distant sounds of battle in the castle. "The Order of the Phoenix is here," Luna reassured them. "They and the professors, they'll hold back the Death Eaters, that's what the second message on the coin said- those are the orders while the students get out of Hogwarts, the DA is to protect the evacuation-"

"We can't give up Hogwarts!" exclaimed Connor, while the other two children hushed him with their wide terrified saucer eyes.

"If it's giving up Hogwarts, or giving up lives," Draco said bluntly, "Dumbledore will give up Hogwarts. It's only a place. It can be retaken. You- you three, if you fell, *you* couldn't be taken back, or brought back to live. When someone's killed, they stay dead..."

They were heading towards the Room of Requirement, Draco soon ascertained, which made sense. They were evacuating the students through the Hogs Head, then, as planned, and upon their arrival by staircase onto the seventh floor, they could hear the sound of many voices close by. Students, no doubt, and no few not yet inside the safety of the room or the staircase out to Hogsmeade. Ariana Dumbledore would be guiding all the little ones of Hogwarts to safety tonight, and she was not yet done her mission.

When a group sprang out at them from behind the corner and yanked Draco towards them, he was naive enough to hope it was Dumbledore's Army, helping guard the students' retreat. He almost expected the strong, frantic grip on his wrist to be Harry's. But it was Pansy Parkinson's, her dark eyes cutting at once into him like more of a brand than his wand had put in Fenrir Greyback, that much already of accusation.

"Where is he?" she gasped out, with Blaise, Vince, Millie, and Greg all in a knot behind her, their eyes to the one asking the same question. She planted her feet and made the effort to look Draco right in the eye, getting in the way to forestall any progress he would have made. In that stance, there was an awful certainty. They all to a one knew who Pansy meant.

"What?" Draco made himself say. He could muster surprise, at least, at seeing all his Kingsnakes arrayed before him, ready to hinder him from making it out of Hogwarts.

"You're sure Theo was going for Draco tonight?" Millie asked, and the Slytherin boys exchanged glances, as if better-informed than she was.

"I know he did!" Pansy shrieked, and there it was, the last piece of the puzzle, if Luna had needed it.

But Draco met Luna's gaze, in a quick interchange he had to hope did not look like knowing guilt, and there was only anxiety there. He could not tell if she had understood, or if her only

thought now was the threat of death once again come over them and the children.

"Whose side are you on?" Luna called out wildly, once again trying to draw the children behind her. The Slytherins, though, had no eyes for the first-years, nor did they almost seem to have noticed their presence. Draco's was enough for them. "Are you with the Death Eaters? Did one of you cast that mark?"

"Don't be mad," Pansy barked with a mirthless laugh. "We haven't killed anyone. We're just looking for Theo. We've been trying to find him, we know he's come. Draco, *where is Theo*?"

"How should I know?" Draco was seeing this going very ugly in his mind's eye. He stepped towards the Slytherins, not away, and shoved Luna backwards. "Cousin, get these kids out of here! Go to the evacuation point! Go! GO!" Luna hesitated, and Draco screamed wordlessly. She fled then, the three lives in her responsibility seeming to propel her at last. Draco pleaded with whatever gods he didn't believe in that he hadn't just sent his cousin into even worse danger alone.

Then it was Draco and the five Slytherins- all six Slytherins together, if Fenrir was true, a Kingsnakes reunion if Astoria had been there. Draco wondered if she was one of the younger students evacuated through the Room of Requirement already, or if she was off somewhere, waiting for the invasion to finish so she could join whatever fellow Slytherins were there in welcoming the new owner of Hogwarts. So many people in Hogwarts, so many he cared for- even Astoria, he found, poor Astoria, with the boy she loved dead and her never knowing the moment Draco killed him...

"Where is Theo?" Pansy demanded, as if she had been deaf to his earlier denials.

"Draco," Millie said, gaze more troubled. "You really haven't seen him? Anywhere? Or heard anything? Draco, we really don't want to hurt anyone, we just want to see him, to make sure he's alright-"

"I don't know," Draco bit out, an icy rage surging in him suddenly as he stared square at Pansy, finally able to meet her scrutiny with Luna and the first-years gone. "Why *would* I know where Theo is, Pansy? You tell me!"

Ask me where your old house elves are, if you like. Ask me that.

He wondered how much she knew of what Theo had done with their help- presumably with her collaboration, as some kind of intermediary, or at least the agent to engage them on Theo's behalf initially. Had she known about the tracking of Dobby? About Nurmengard? About the Cadaunuptium? The Chamber of Secrets? Was she so frantic because she, and perhaps her boyfriend and his friends- everyone there but Millie perhaps knew that Draco and not Theo had been the one slated to die today, should he step foot back in Hogwarts? Had it been Draco's return to Hogwarts to *trigger* the invasion, so Theo could-

"No, tell me, Pansy!" Draco yelled, and Blaise had drawn his wand, but Draco didn't hesitate to get right in Pansy's face, as if they were still housemates arguing over Quidditch tactics. *She's Quidditch Princess Parkinson,* Draco thought hysterically. *Our Quidditch Princess Parkinson. She'll always get the Quaffle in.*

And what of the Gordian Nott?

"Pansy?" Millie asked, and came to their side, touching Pansy's arm. "Pansy, how *are* you so sure he'd be with Draco? Do you just think he would go after him, because of his father, or-"

"Theo had a plan," blurted Vince, and there it was.

"A plan, huh?" Draco echoed, and brought himself up to full posture against them. "Did he? Well, does it look as though he's succeeded?"

Pansy let out a small, heartbroken sound of dismay, and it all might have turned even uglier then, but for the arrival of someone crying out Millicent Bulstrode's name. "Millie!" called Ginny Weasley, and came running around the corner, only to stop dismayed at the sight of all five Slytherins, lined up facing Draco like the enemy. "Draco," she gasped. "Draco, what's going on? Millie?"

"We can make you tell us," Blaise said, and raised his wand.

"Do you really want to try?" Draco asked silkily, raising the talon wand menacingly, in a show that really proved his uncertainty. Himself against his Kingsnakes, that had left him without fear, but somehow two against five sounded impossible odds again.

"Draco," Blaise said, and his voice was less angry than pleading, nearly begging. "We just want to find our friend."

And then a sea of orange heads came running around the corner, and Draco remembered how to breathe again. Not just Ron but the Weasley twins too, coming running to their sister's side, and Luna with them. The odds turned at once in their favor, with the prospect of more DA members too coming behind them.

"Go ahead, Blaise!" Draco yelled triumphantly, though it felt in that moment as if he had committed another crime. "Go ahead and try it!"

"Let's go, we're getting nowhere here," Pansy said tightly. She whirled, only to stop when one of her own didn't follow. "Millie? What are you doing, Mills?" Her gaze was not so much surprised as betrayed, as if she had hoped but not truly expected her best friend to also fall in line. *If she knows what Wooky and Nissy knew-*

I choked them to death and burned their bodies. I'll never know exactly who they told what now. That is *the inconvenient thing about cold-blooded murder.*

You killed Theodore Nott in cold blood-

Stop thinking*!*

"I don't- I don't know," Millie said in a strangled voice. "The Dark Lord is going to take the school- they were evacuating the younger Slytherins- Pansy, do you think we should-"

"We've got nothing to fear from Vince and Greg's fathers," Blaise said angrily, grabbing her arm only to be shaken aside, letting the DA watch the Slytherins turn on each other. "We

don't, Mills! What are you *doing*? We're going! You aren't thinking of staying with them, are you?"

"Millie!" Ginny cried out, as if she could hold herself back no longer, and raced forward. Her red hair streamed behind her like a line of fire through the air, as powerful as she was small. "Millie, don't go! Please don't go!"

"What?" Ron hissed, looking between the heated girls with incomprehension. Draco grabbed his arm to hold him back. Ron's gaze went to Draco in bafflement. Draco shrugged helplessly, and whispered,

"They've been playing Quidditch together."

"What?"

Draco smiled at Ron to show he meant it, with a poke in Ron's ribs. Ron enfolded Draco in a half-armed hug, and Draco leaned against him with the guilt of a relief he didn't deserve to feel. "Bloody hell, Frankenstein, I'm so glad you're alive."

"Same here, Cannon," Draco whispered, then stared back at the spectacle of Ginny Weasley begging.

"I don't know," Millie said, a virtual tug-of-war going on for her now. Pansy seized one arm once Ginny had seized the other, eyeing the youngest Gryffindor with loathing.

"Let her go!" Pansy demanded. "She's one of ours! Millie, you won't leave us, will you?"

It was in one moment the twin pull Draco had felt for years on end, before he had made his choice, in the Department of Mysteries with Sectumsempra. Draco could only ache helplessly for Millie, for a decision she had to make now, purely in herself-

"We can't just be standing in the hall like this!" George yelled, drawing his wand, and Draco mentally willed it back into his pocket. "Any of you who want to evacuate the school- fine, you're students here too, come on, but if you're not coming, then leave us alone! If you have a score to settle with Draco-"

"Millie," Ginny pleaded at the same time, "Please don't go," and a shudder went through Millie's solid frame, her gaze darting helplessly between the two claims on her.

Draco went to her side, already expecting curses to begin flying between the two groups, but he risked it. He had been the one to entangle her with Ginny, to keep her tied to his world. He was the only one in that hallway who knew an ounce of the true struggle that Millie must be feeling inside herself- all the worse, because she had no foreknowledge to guide her, nor any guilt of her own. She had been placed here by circumstances, and by her own ability to care for those outside her narrow purview. Her very sweetness was what had her here being torn in half-

"Draco!" Millie exclaimed, and with a great heave extracted herself from both other girls to grab him by the shoulders, as little fearful of him as when they were children. "Draco,

listen..." Her voice lowered, thankfully, as she breathed, "Draco, swear to me that you don't know where Theo is, that you didn't do anything to him..."

Draco didn't hesitate to whisper back, "I swear, Millie. I haven't seen Theo since he attacked us at Nurmengard."

"Pans, I-" Millie drew back from Draco, staring at her Slytherin friends in unreadable horror. "Pansy, I think I want to go with them. I'm sorry, but Ginny is my- my friend, she's- she's made me see-"

"Why?" Pansy howled. "Because of this bitch?" She drew her wand, pointed it in Ginny's face. "She doesn't see a thing! They're all blind! Conjuncti-"

Pansy's voice died when Millie stepped between her and Ginny, ready to take the curse if necessary. But Pansy clearly did not have it in her to finish the word against her own once-friend.

"Fine!" Pansy yelled, tears in her voice. "Fine! We'll find Theo without you! Traitor! *Blood* traitor!"

"Millie," Ginny said, tugging on her hand as the Slytherins ran in a pack away from them. "Millie, are you really going to stay with us- with me-"

"Yes," Millie breathed, voice a great shuddering collapse, and she stared down at Ginny with a universe of uncertainty in her eyes, as if she could not yet reckon the scope of what she had just done. But it didn't seem to matter in the end. A second of their staring, faces near, and then Millie and Ginny were kissing, just a heartbeat after the Slytherins racing down the staircase could have looked back and seen. Half of Ginny's brothers were there to see, stunned gasps coming from them in mass, but not, it turned out, Luna, nor Draco either.

Millie's Keeper's bulk loomed over Ginny protectively, as her big hands went to the younger girl's face and she poured herself into the kiss, dark hair entwining with Ginny's red as they leaned as close together as possible. Ginny went onto her tiptoes, kissing Millie a thousand times more passionately than Draco had ever seen her kiss Dean Thomas- or even, if Draco strained his memory, than he had seen her kiss Harry Potter. Ginny was kissing Millie like she would have died if Millie had chosen to go away, and Millie's choice had been a choice of her and her fully, a choice of everything that came with it, some kind of surprising promise between them. That was there in their rapture. Some momentous and unforeseen promise-

But there was no time. Millie was the one practical enough to pull back and bark at the DA, "Come on, let's go! Are we waiting for a Death Eater escort out of Hogwarts?"

Draco grabbed Luna's hand as they ran back where the Weasleys had come. "Thank you," he whispered, "Thank you for bringing Ginny, I didn't know you knew," and Luna smiled breathlessly.

"I didn't know you knew," she hissed, "And the boys wouldn't let their sister go without them, but..." She glanced over to Millie at Ginny's side, then back to him with giddy anxiety. "I

thought it would be the best way to save you from the Slytherins. Here, Draco, you should go into the Room of Requirement, you're shaking..."

It sounded bizarre to Draco's ears, that anyone still thought he needed *saving* anymore, but he supposed she'd just seen him freeze up facing Greyback. She'd been the one with the plan, who'd guessed a weakness and launched them into action to save the children.

There were more children to keep safe now, streaming into the Room of Requirement across the bemused painting of Barnaby the Barmy- great lines of them being harassed into some semblance of order as they evacuated by the prefects, including-

"STRIKER!" Draco shrieked, and broke off from Luna to run forward and hug Hermione, in complete disregard of any order.

Hermione suffered his embrace for longer than she had to, but not much longer. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she sighed, "And so are you, Draco, and so is Harry, if you're worried," and Draco peeled back with his heart in his mouth. Now that he'd decided to be honest with Harry, he felt like there would be a neon sign on his forehead for only Harry to see, proclaiming what he had done. And that shouldn't have mattered, shouldn't have wanted to make him avoid Harry as top priority up to and including the disaster befallen Hogwarts, but it did. For a moment, it felt like he'd rather run after the group of Slytherins and volunteer to show them the way to whatever remained of Theo's body.

"Here, help keep watch from inside," Hermione ordered, sensing his shakenness. Draco truly was too shook up, to protest that he, with all his power and bluster, should be at the front lines. "Harry is in there, but don't distract him. We're going to get all of these children out of Hogwarts."

Bloody hell, Aberforth must be having his most eventful day for decades. Draco could imagine him, grumbling but protective towards the scared children despite himself. From there to the planned Portkeys to Xaphan, as Sirius and Remus had been pitched it. Just as if Dumbledore had foreseen this.

Draco wondered if Dumbledore had foreseen what Draco had done to Theo, too.

He parted from the DA outside with swift hugs, the twins included, and ran into the Room of Requirement as commanded. It was the Room of Hidden Things, with the line of children leading from the door right to the entrance to the secret passage. There were Ravenclaws near the door, telling the more hysterical-looking youngsters to keep calm and be patient, once they got past the threshold and saw the door to salvation just a few dozen heads before them.

Draco came face-to-face with Cho Chang there, and her little friend. He extracted an indignant squeal from Cho by hugging her too, of all people. He couldn't help it. It had somehow seemed inconceivable to him that half the world had not perished along with Theodore Nott that night.

"I'm glad you're alive," Draco blurted to her, "I'm sorry," and then let her go and ran past, trying to see where Harry was despite himself.

It wasn't hard. Harry stood motionless beside a large workbench, draped over with black fabric to shroud behind it. Draco's feet took him over, drawn as if by magnetism by the sight of that tousled black hair. He had to know if Harry was hurt, if he was alright, and if the meeting of their eyes was a confession- well, so be it. He could never avoid Harry for long, any more than a planet could avoid the sun it revolved around.

Harry looked a mess, dark hair indeed in its most post-Quidditch-like state of disarray, and his beautiful green eyes distant and almost unseeing upon the charges beside him. Some of the children waved and called out to Harry, clearly taking heart in both the protection by and the safety of the Boy Who Lived, and anyone who knew Harry well could see how mechanically he returned the gestures of the Creeveys of the world.

"Harry!" Draco cried out, sprinting to his side, and couldn't help but grab his hands, despite the vague conviction building in him that touching Harry would inarguably sully him now. "Harry, you're here! You-" He lowered his voice. He supposed Harry had ended up safe with the Order of the Phoenix, just like in the blue loop. He would still have liked to get Harry through the passage to Aberforth and then Xaphan as quickly as possible. "Your mission with the headmaster, you made it back, you found our friends, I'm so glad-"

"No," Harry said in a hollow voice, barely seeming to feel Draco's touch on him. "No, don't be- glad. Don't be." Then his eyes cleared and he grabbed Draco's hands back with a shocking vehemence. "Oh my God, Draco," he breathed, and then he had wrapped his arms around Draco and buried his face in his shoulder. Draco could feel the shudder and shiver of unshed tears against him.

Draco could only wrap his arms around Harry in response, ready to give any comfort Harry could want of him, no matter the circumstances. The children going past them stared, but you could hardly make that matter now. "Harry..." Draco kissed his sweaty hair. "Harry, it's okay. Don't worry. Everything's going to be alright-"

"No," Harry blurted, "Nothing is, you don't understand, it's my fault, I might as well have done it to him," and Draco pulled back to try and read his troubled face. There was a seething chaos there, like something had been pushed over the brink, or taken away that could not be taken back, and even the touch of Draco as his anchor was nowhere near enough to put Harry back on his feet again.

"Done what? Harry..." he said, and then, like Luna's eyes towards the ruined uniform on the ground, his gaze followed Harry's, towards what Harry seemed to call his crime.

There was a table set up behind the workbench. From this side, the workbench was clearly large enough to accommodate five users, and yet it had been moved to a place of prominence in the Room of Hidden Things for some reason, during an attack of the greatest gravity. Yes, the Order was holding back any Death Eaters from reaching their retreat, but how much longer- the Slytherins had been able to get through to demand Theo- so the effort made to move such a great object beside the path of the children, as if with its great conjured-looking black drape to obscure something-

It was obscuring the table from any possible view, with Harry's body doing the last bit of covering from any angle, looking towards it from the entrance. The table was long and scratched but gleaming hard redwood, probably dragged from somewhere deep in the Room of Hidden Things. It was not empty. There was a black heap on it, like a set of ruined clothes, long but fully shrouded in black drapes that matched the ones on the workbench, conjured-looking too. Conjured in order to hide- the body. That was a body under the drapes.

Draco stepped away from Harry, and towards the body, with a reminder to himself that the body could not be Theo's, because Draco had burned it.

"It was my fault," Draco heard Harry say, and slowly, as respectfully blocking from view as he could, he lifted the top of the drapes from the face of the body.

He didn't know why he was surprised, at the glint of the spectacles on the dead cold face. He should have already expected the long matted grey hair, and long matted grey beard, and the eerie unwounded, unhurt face that the Killing curse left on its victims. There virtually seemed to be green light reflected in the open blue eyes, as brilliant as they had ever been even as they rested as inert globes in their dead sockets. He should have known that Harry was mourning Albus Dumbledore.

Draco should have pulled the sheet back up. He didn't. It was an unforgivable moment, as so many had been, but he didn't restore the dignity of the corpse. He began frantically to search the robe pockets.

"That's exactly what your godfather did," Harry said, coming up behind Draco with no humor in his voice. He took the sheet from Draco's hand and pulled it over the whole body, head included, as if he could not bear having it uncovered any longer. "He sprang on him searching like that. You can save yourself the trouble. He looked everywhere. The Headmaster's wand is nowhere."

"Harry," Draco gasped, turning to Dumbledore's protégé without the sensitivity he should have shown, only a greater horror. "Harry, no... Harry, what *happened*..." How had this happened without Draco, without the Unbreakable Vow- from the sounds of it, without Severus...

"Professor Dumbledore and I went to-" Harry lowered his voice to speak right into Draco's ear. "We went to search for one of the Horcruxes, I have it, but- when we got back, we saw the Dark Mark- we flew back on brooms, to the Astronomy Tower- he told me he needed Professor Snape. He said to run and get him, without fail, so I did. I ran and I found your godfather, and we ran back, but when we got there, Professor Dumbledore was- like he is now. Because I abandoned him."

"With his wand missing," Draco finished for him, and Harry nodded. A tear slid down from one of his devastated emerald eyes. "On the Tower, not- not fallen from it?"

"On the Tower. I should have stayed with him," Harry said helplessly, not seeming to wonder at Draco's strange question. "I knew it was dangerous- knew the enemy was here- knew he had been weakened, by what we had to do in that cave- I shouldn't have left him- I couldn't leave him there- I levitated him, back here, and Snape went to hold the Death Eaters back,

with the rest of the Order. I took him here, and I covered him- I couldn't leave him behind, for them to- do as they liked with his- his body..." Harry's shoulders slumped, more tears streaking his face. "I'll take him through to Xaphan. God, I'll have to tell his brother that he- and it's my fault..."

"Harry, you did as he told you," Draco said intently. "It's not your fault at all. It's the fault of whoever did this to him. Who- who did, Harry? Who killed Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"I don't know," Harry said, and buried his face in his hands. "I have no idea."

The Seaside Grave

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone. I'm sorry for such a long hiatus. I'm sorry to anyone I worried. I never mean to, but if I don't have anything to post, I don't really know how to address it. For the final book, I don't anticipate being able to work on that very soon, but I do still intend to finish the series sometime. I'm posting this just to finish up the sixth book properly, which was such a labor of love. I hope everyone enjoys the final chapter of it.

Thanks so much to everyone who's commented and given their thoughts on all of the books. It's really been a special pleasure and honor to hear from so many people. I appreciate it so much. Sorry again for the wait, and here's the final chapter.

Xaphan was full. That was the word for it, full to brimming with terrified schoolchildren, being received in an incongruously bright, enthusiastic fashion by none other than the keeper of the place: Gilderoy Lockhart, whose presence to those who had been his students earlier was hardly inspiring of confidence. But welcome Gilderoy did, guiding the children confidently to their designated areas per year, with some words picked out for those older ones he did recognize as his former pupils. Millie, for one, was recognizable enough to receive a hearty welcome that embarrassed her to no end. She seemed unsure of herself, and having attention drawn to her presence made her understandably wary. She and Ginny gave Gilderoy weak smiles and moved on.

Gilderoy was there to direct the professors and members of the Order in from the established Portkey destination as well. Those who were merely exhausted and tired, to the right, those who needed medical attention after the battle with the Death Eaters, to the left. Severus was in the former group, but his appearance made Gilderoy predictably falter where otherwise he had been the consummate host. "Severus," he said, as if coming face to face again was a matter of similar nerves to him as battling and fleeing from Death Eaters was for the rest of the island's incoming populace. "Severus, it's, er, good to see you."

"It is *good*," Severus hissed, "To see no one, on this bleak day. Where is Potter?"

Harry was the one who had entrusted himself with the solemn transport of Dumbledore's covered form. Gilderoy directed Severus to the empty, half-reconstructed ruins where Harry and Aberforth had taken him. Severus stalked off without a word. Only a brief glance backwards, as if to try and tell Gilderoy his temper was not for him, before striding on.

It was harder for Xaphan to welcome the headmaster's body, but they had managed it. It was not yet decided what was to be done with it, let alone what and when the students and adults both would be told about the awful discovery Harry and Severus had made on the Astronomy Tower. Draco was possessed by a gnawing sense of blue-colored blood guilt, as if the world

had felt obliged to circle around to its old destination for Dumbledore- not that Draco hadn't killed more than enough to theoretically oblige Death to spare another of his unspoken choice. He trailed after his godfather until they arrived at the shrouded form, only to jump along with the others there when Severus barked, "Well? Is Xaphan in possession of any tombs?"

That was, one had to acknowledge, a question that might have been better addressed to the place's indentured architect just now, but Draco had no heart to admonish anyone else. He might have looked askance at Harry and Aberforth, though, who had been speaking quietly before Severus and Draco's arrival, and only looked up before continuing on. "So you do know the story," Aberforth was saying to him intently, "About my sister. She was your guide, out of Hogwarts."

"I know the story as well," Severus said sourly. "Now. We must prepare the body for burial."

"Did you know my brother wasn't guilty?" Aberforth asked intently, turning from Severus to Draco with an intensity for that truth far more than the simple matter of life or death. "He wasn't, was he," he repeated, and Draco nodded to sustain the lie. "I heard it from Draco," Aberforth said, in a distant, haunted tone, "But I never said so to Albus. I never even spoke to him after that, before..."

"He knew he was innocent," Draco provided, and Severus's sharp glance over at him, not informed until now of this supposed fact, seemed to contain some guarded share of reticence at the convenience of this new knowledge. "I told him."

"Of course he was innocent," Harry said loyally. "He couldn't have done... that. Even as an accident. Headmaster Dumbledore, he- he was good." Harry stared down at the black cloth as if it could answer him somehow, with his own guilt a near-visible weight on his strong shoulders. Draco had to go to him and touch those shoulders then, much to Severus's visible disgust.

"Whatever he did or did not do... whoever did this to him... people must be told," Severus said succinctly, "That he is gone. And the body must be buried."

"Albus," a voice breathed from behind them, and Professor McGonagall arrived at the scene, flanked by Hagrid behind her. "That... that is Albus?"

"*No*," Hagrid gasped, and where McGonagall managed to contain her initial outburst of grief, Hagrid was unable. Draco let Harry go so he could comfort their friend. Then he felt a rush of compunction, at letting self-loathing hold him back from what should be done, and went and embraced Harry and Hagrid too.

What should be done. Severus was right. However grave what had happened that past day and night, however sorrowful the passing of Albus Dumbledore, the world turned to practicalities now.

"What are we doing here?" Hermione asked, and it was a good question. The moonstones loomed around them from every side, lit by some invisible source. It was almost undue pressure on the eyes, that much surreal, ever-effervescent brilliance. Walking the steps of Dantanian Noir was not the most pleasant of sights, however initially striking the beauty around them.

"You haven't been here, have you?" Draco mused. "But surely you recognize it."

"Harry told me you opened it," Hermione said, and a part of him tensed at just the mention of opening a secret chamber, but the knowledge of Theo and the Chamber of Secrets remained with him- and perhaps Luna- alone. So he was resolved it would stay. "But why have you taken me here?"

"I wanted your eyes, when I did this. I didn't have the chance, before," Draco told her, and felt his shoes plod over the gleaming obsidian floor in yet more echoing remnants of Dantanian's footsteps, as he advanced towards the Mirror of Erised. Harry awaited him there as faithfully as he always did, Harry as he had seen him today. The reflection seemed always to age with the real Harry, as if the most recent face he had seen was always the most desirable. That constant was some comfort, like an eye as a brief respite in the foretold unfurling of a hurricane.

"Draco, are you," Hermione breathed, "Luna told us she thought you'd found," and Draco handed her the Mirror of Espilce, since cleaned of any blood. It gleamed perfect and sterile between her smaller hands, the reversed letters quick for her to grasp. "Even death may die," she read, "In the dawning of the eclipse. Draco, did Grindelwald give this to you?"

"It was in his chest," Draco explained, and strode around the triangle at the center of the room, feet sweeping out the side of a circle, where before his feet and the position of the awaiting holder had drawn a straight line. "I don't know how or why, but he'd somehow gotten it in there and was hiding it. All that about the eclipse to get it out was a lie. I think he was scared when I found out where it really was, that I would cut him open to take it. That's why he made all that up."

"Which you would never have done," Hermione said in horror, and Draco forced a smile.

"Of course not," he said, and it was not hard for her then, to press out the story of the real circumstances of Grindelwald's death. He couldn't bear the horror on her face when she first heard of his Sectumsempra cutting Grindelwald open, but at least she seemed to understand, with Grindelwald's own command, and the circumstances as given.

"You had to do it, Draco," she said, touching his elbow with sorrow in her eyes, but sorrow *for* him. "Maybe the one who killed him would take possession of the mirror. He couldn't take the risk of that being Theo, could he? He wanted it to be you. Apart from who he wanted to- to choose, as his killer." She shuddered at the macabre thought.

"You said," Draco heard himself say, as if from very far away, "That premeditated murder was beyond the pale. That if we did that, we were no better than the people we were fighting."

"That wasn't murder, Draco, that was euthanasia," Hermione said gently, and enfolded him in her arms. He let himself pretend for that moment it was forgiveness for a different murder, one he already felt pressing on his chest, of which he could never speak. "You put him out of his misery. His death was inevitable, and not acting would just have prolonged his suffering. And that would have been the wrong thing to do, I'm certain of it. It's wrong to stand by and just watch someone suffer."

"I love you, Hermione," Draco breathed, while he told himself that, indeed, Theo had been suffering.

"I love you too," Hermione said with a sigh, "But that's not why we're here, is it?"

"No," Draco said, and took the mirror back from her. He wasn't about to expose her to any possible danger from this act. He held it before him between his hands, and solemnly approached the obsidian holder with a space just the right size for the mirror, another one of the triangle faces to complete. And so he completed it, letting it slide out from between his fingers into a place it almost seemed to clack and click into. It looked even smaller there, dwarfed by all the stone around it, and yet its surroundings now marked it as the equal at least of the Mirror of Erised. As an object of unmistakable mystery and threat.

Nothing else happened, though, either visibly or in feeling. There was no eruption of light, no change in either of the mirrors, nor any new sensation of rightness or power. He'd almost hoped there would be some reaction somewhere, to uniting two of the Daughters' Mirrors. But all it accomplished was retracing something that no doubt Dantanian had once done. And he would have taken it back out, to be sure, just as Draco did now, for the mobile one of the mirrors- Grindelwald had called it a weapon- to be put to use once more.

"Whatever might happen," Hermione said softly, "From the mirrors being brought together, do you think it will only happen if it's all three of them you have here?" Draco nodded, and pocketed the Mirror of Espilce. He felt a jot of panicked exposed guilt at the slightest of sounds, the knocking of metal on metal- the mirror against Periander's dagger- but of course Hermione hadn't heard it, and wouldn't have known the things it meant. And he had a story made up for it even if she had.

"You're right," Draco said, willing to agree with any proposition which took him away from thoughts of Theo. "It probably does take all three. But I'm sure there are things that just this mirror can do." They knew about the Dementors. And Draco knew about the fire.

"Why do you think Grindelwald hid the mirror within himself, for so long?" Hermione asked, coming close behind him. Draco took out the mirror and let her hold it for a while, examining her own reflection as if expecting it to somehow change at any moment to something revelatory.

"I think," Draco said, "Because there was something about it that made it dangerous. Too dangerous even for Grindelwald."

Draco had to ask around a fair bit, that second night of their exile at Xaphan, but eventually he found himself directed to one of the places he should have checked first: the Hogwarts kitchens. He found Luna there sitting on the cold stone floor with Dobby, listening raptly to his story of the escape of the Hogwarts house elves. "You led it, of course," Draco surmised easily, and Dobby went all embarrassed and self-conscious at the reminder of his own Gryffindor heroism.

"But Dobby was not successful," Dobby said sadly, wringing his hands together there in the dark corner where Draco settled himself with them. "Dobby did not get out all of the elves. Dobby's old friends Wooky and Nissy are missing."

Luna frowned. "Oh, Dobby," she said sadly. "They were so angry with you, for being on our side, with everything. And they were Parkinson elves, before Hogwarts. Do you think- maybe they would have chosen to stay behind?"

"Like Vince and Greg, and Blaise and Pansy?" Draco finished for her, tasting ashes on his tongue.

Dobby accepted the explanation quickly, seeming to sense the deceptive verisimilitude in it, or just grateful for any version of events which didn't involve him having abandoned his once-closest friends. Draco hugged him firmly then- so firmly he had to pull himself back sternly, for fear of betraying his own guilt- and then Luna did, and then even at this hour, Dobby was called back to work by the other elves, trying to clean and organize the Xaphan kitchens into some semblance of working order to again feed an army of students upon the morrow.

Draco walked Luna back to the makeshift Ravenclaw dorms- off the first-floor corridor beside the library tower, as if Gilderoy had claimed all that section for his former house. She was quiet and pensive, as she often was these days, but she seemed to brighten upon hearing he had told Hermione of the Mirror of Espilce, and not of Luna's role in helping him conceal it from the adults. "Do you think it will help?" she asked, simply enough, and yet it was another fraught question.

"It already has," Draco said, and from the face she turned to him then, even she didn't catch the full implication. She started and hugged him painfully, though, upon his whispered revelation about his role in Grindelwald's death, and seemed thankful he intended to let all of their small group know about that and the mirror.

"You should, you know," she said earnestly. "Especially Harry. You've made the promise to be honest with him, you can't let it fall away now."

Then her gaze dropped, as even she seemed to feel the hypocrisy in her own words, knowing some great unspeakable terror he was holding back from the entire world's eyes. He wished he could tell her that the evidence had been burned. Instead, he answered that entreaty with, "Look at this. Fenrir Greyback, I think."

She took the dagger from him in a horrified kind of stupor, turning it over in her hand by the hilt. Her light eyes seemed to be remembering the sight of it discarded bloodied on the bathroom floor outside his shower, beside his bloodied ashen clothes. "What-"

"I got this dagger," Draco said, enunciating clear and heavy on every fatal word of falsehood, "From Fenrir Greyback. That's how I got it back. He had it, when we were saving those first-years from him, and he dropped it when I cursed him, and I grabbed it and took it with me, that's why I have it now, after losing it at Nurmengard. Right? That's how it happened?"

"Yes," Luna said, after a shorter period than he would have expected. It only seemed enough time for her to understand his words, as if no time was needed for internal debate about whether or not to help him. That much seemed a foregone conclusion for her. "Yes, I saw, you got it from Fenrir Greyback. Do you... do you think the first-years saw that?"

"I think," Draco said carefully, "Things were so hectic and terrifying for them then, they won't be sure whether or not they've seen anything. Nor would anyone expect them to."

Luna stared at him, then stepped forward and enveloped him in her arms with a great ponderous hug, seizing him with all the strength in her little body. "Draco," she gasped. "Draco, I wish- I wish I didn't know- *Theodore Nott*-"

"Do you want to know more?" Draco asked her, and she hastily shook her head.

"No," she said violently, "No, I don't." It sounded like she didn't want it to be true. Maybe this way she could keep up some plausible deniability in her head, or lessen her own guilt.

"Then I won't tell you," Draco said, and hugged her tighter.

There was so much to be done, so much that it was easier than usual not to think. There was a Ravenclaw house and common room to put in order, right around him, and then there was the chaos of the whole new castle, still half-built and in many cases half-supplied. There was more personal matters as well, such as ensuring Millie was comfortable at Xaphan, in the midst of so many she would never feel she belonged with. As much as Ginny could help with that, there was some things Draco had to focus on, like making sure she had full clothes and supplies for herself.

It was a reality striking her and Draco along with everyone else. In fleeing, they had left their possessions at Hogwarts, for the Death Eaters, and any students who stayed on their side, to do with as they pleased. Draco, for one, had a good idea what certain Slytherins might wish to do with his things, once one of them made it past the Ravenclaw entrance. Even without Theo to help, Blaise or Pansy should suffice...

But Draco wasn't thinking about them.

Instead, he threw himself into the management of the place. Remus was the one most focused on supplies, already having spare uniforms for each student in place, but needing more, as well as arranging their transport home. Still, there was one project Draco found himself confounded by, a project that could be laid at the feet of no one but him.

What to do about Grindelwald's body.

The phoenix's lament was haunting, and Draco was hardly worthy to listen to it, given the current state of his temperament. He stared forward at the great white edifice of Dumbledore's new seaside tomb, and felt the song within himself, but as an admonishment for the lack of sorrow. As if Fawkes could somehow sing his way into the soul of each mourner, and read their grief or lack thereof, manifest to the most bereaved of them all. Perhaps it would be different if Draco could summon up tears for the occasion, the way Harry beside him had. But as person after person came forward to speak of history, of Dumbledore's great impact on the world and their own lives- Fawkes's song over Xaphan lending their words the endorsement of pure emotion behind them- the purest emotion Draco could feel was rage, bubbling under as inappropriate as if he had designs to spring forward and smash at the pale stone.

Because once again, Dumbledore had left Draco in the dark. The old trickster. He had departed the world with all his secrets still with him, his killer even the last secret that hung over all of their heads. The Elder Wand was gone, and Dumbledore had somehow contrived to die in a manner that left them without any knowledge as to where that could be found. If Draco were to die soon, he would be sure to leave at least *some* kind of signpost where the talon wand could be found. *Here lies Dantanian Noir. Take at your own peril.*

And then there was the locket retrieved with so much strife, on the night the world as it had been had come to an end: a fake that Harry carried with him always, RAB the taunting thief who Dumbledore would never have the courtesy to come down from the sky and unmask for them. The selfish man. But Draco was hardly at pulse with the mood of the times.

Cry, you deceitful bastard, he willed himself. *Cry. It's what's in fashion.*

Here lay Albus Dumbledore, and Harry was not the only one softly crying at the song of Fawkes and words of Minerva McGonagall. There was the shabby, lonely figure of Aberforth. Draco gave Harry a last reassuring squeeze on the shoulder before leaving him and crossing the mourners towards the deceased's brother. Sirius and Remus enfolded Harry in their paternal embrace, and Draco went and offered a hug to the man without anyone else in the world to give him one. To Draco's surprise, the silent bereaved accepted him.

We don't know where the wand is. We don't know where the rest of the Horcruxes *are. We don't know where the wand is...* That was the mantra that circulated through Draco's head all the worse as Aberforth clung to him and began to let out great belting sobs, so much they drew attention. Draco wished he could return the stares with his own acid tongue- this was the only actual family present, he was relatively sure- but they just had to proceed with the solemn ritual of it all, them the mourners who had evacuated to Xaphan with the body. No others could have been trusted enough to bring to the island for the funeral. Their new school, their new fortress, Dumbledore's new great monument and tomb- the ocean beside it was gleaming, on a sun-streaked day so beautiful it almost mocked their tears.

Draco left that maddening scene as soon as he could, once it had formally disbanded. He didn't know if there was to be any form of reception or the like, but he had to trust his friends to comfort each other, now that Aberforth had officially departed the scene. He noticed a sideways glance from Harry as Draco made his skulking way off from the part of the wall

that held the new tomb, but Harry didn't follow, and Draco was relieved. Selfish as it was, thoroughly as he should have thrown himself into comforting his crying friends with his own lack of grief as an advantage, he had his own work to do tonight, and it was elsewhere. If not very far.

Draco's feet knew the path without him having to think of it much. He had been here already many times, first choosing the site, then overseeing the creation of the grave. In lack of any enthusiasm from other parties, it had been Draco himself to put his crafting abilities at last to practical use, and take the stone and carve it, with minimal direction. The end result? Well, the best that could be said for it was that it looked something like a proper grave. In the same way Draco looked something like a proper hero.

It was a blunt rectangle of stone set magically in the firm dirt that led into sand, right at the oceanside. The stone had no particular decoration, save an indentation painstakingly carved in as a frame and then another smaller frame, curtailing the space to be used for writing. Draco had agonized over this piece of work far more than anyone would guess, wondering just how much ornamentation was proper for the grave of a man like Grindelwald. He had ever been conscious of not wanting to apply himself too much, to not create a spectacle that seemed any variety of praise for the body that dwelt beneath it.

Magic would shield the stone and the body from the threat of the ocean nearby, should it escape the normal bounds of tide or storm, even should the island shrink over centuries and erosion begin its slow uncaring work. That would be too much for many if asked, of course. Many would deprive Grindelwald of any kind of monument, though at least its location in Xaphan would prevent many visitors, or fascist pilgrimages or the like.

Maybe Grindelwald should have been burned and his ashes scattered over the water instead. But here it was, a smoothed but dark surface of flat granite that read, *Gellert Grindelwald. 1883-1997.* There remained a long section beneath the spare carving waiting for more writing, some verdict to be placed upon the man's name above it. That conspicuous absence remained so, and none but Draco would fill it.

The sand was not far away, but Draco was lazy enough to summon rather than go collect it as he sat cross-legged before his newest and largest art project, rather on a greater scale than the charms on Hermione's bracelet carved of transfigured turquoise. Draco let the sand drop onto the empty part of the slab in the ground, itself perhaps a profanation, and began to test out words writing in the sand. *Monster,* he tested out in outline form, and the sheer absurdity on a grave made him laugh. But what else could he put that would not be an insult to so many uselessly dead by this man's hand, and this man's influence a lifetime ago? Not that Draco had seen that side of him, or very much of it. To Draco he had been... had his own hand really just written out the word *Mentor*? Draco smoothed over the sand, and tried writing *Listener*, and had to keep laughing at himself. The sound came out rather hysterical, like he was some unwanted little one playing with sandcastles, with no greater care in the world to occupy an abandoned child.

Liar, Draco tried, but it was useless, as was *Fascist* or *Repentant,* even though only the latter felt a lie. He ended up sweeping the sand away as best he could, putting an end to this macabre free association game, and decided to speak to the grave instead.

"So we meet again," Draco said, and found himself pulling a face before he remembered that there ought to be some respect paid to the dead, even if unworthy of the outpouring of grief and song that met the likes of Albus Dumbledore. "I've gotten sand on your grave, you know."

As one would expect of a grave, the grave was silent, despite the enormity of the offense.

"I should be with my friends, mourning Dumbledore, not you," Draco said conversationally. "Not that I *am* mourning you, you old bastard. No one's going to mourn you, you know. At least not anyone who really knew you." That was, if anyone left in this world did. Did Draco qualify? Had he *known* the Prisoner of Nurmengard?

"Maybe I'm here to tell you something," Draco mused aloud. "Homenum revelio... something only for your decomposed ears, mind." The spell showed no one in the immediate vicinity, which was good enough. "It's something only you would understand, so it's a pity you had to die, Grindelwald, before you could hear it. I mean, I don't know what we would have done with you if you *had* lived- I guess you'd have ended up at L'Infern, bored and railing at me for false advertising- but there, I could have come, and you could have listened to me. Since I met you, it never occurred to me, you know, that you'd stop being there to listen to me." Draco took a deep breath, once again needing to modulate his ire. *Let's keep blaming that on Dantanian.* "So fucking inconsiderate of you to die. Even if I am the one that killed you. But I killed Theo too, and I didn't make *him* a gravestone, I just set him on fire, so you ought to feel special-"

Draco's voice was breaking, so he stopped talking until he had it under control. As if anyone was listening but the wind. But still he found himself speaking as if Grindelwald could hear. "Yeah, I killed you, alright? But I would have saved you if I could have. You know that. You have to know that.

"So I'm here to tell you that I've made up my mind," Draco finished, clearing his throat. "It's me. I made a deal, and I'm going to stick to it. Me for Severus. I'm going to be the one who Death takes. I'm going to pay his price. Except- except-" Draco's voice broke fully then, but he kept going. "It turns out I actually don't *want* to die. I don't want to die at *all*, Grindelwald. Do you think when I go, I'll go as peacefully as you did? I doubt it."

Draco felt tears threatening at the back of his eyes, hot and tinged with self-pity, and he lacked the will to hold them back. A remaining streak of sand across the granite surface was darkened tan by a teardrop landing on it, striking in one round shape like a bullet hole before rolling through the sand to wet more. Another teardrop, the tears he hadn't been able to summon for Dumbledore arriving for himself.

"It does have to be me, you know," he said all in a burst, justifying himself to Grindelwald. "I'm sure of it. I have to be the one to die. It's just- a bit hard to imagine, all that, dying. You made it look so easy, but... now that I've chosen this, it turns out there's so little time left, and Harry..."

Don't let yourself talk about Harry, it will just make you cry more.

Draco talked about Harry, and cried more.

"I don't want to leave Harry. I wish there was some way to die without leaving *him.* I need him too much to die and go somewhere he won't be. I need to be near him. I want to be near him as much as I can be. Before it's over. Before I pay- before I pay the bargain of Orpheus-"

Draco found himself doubling over, clutching at his stomach and sides as his words poured out, childish and pleading. "Merlin, I can't. I love him too much to die." And then, spoken from another part of himself, detached and absolute as the swing of a sword down on an unprotected neck: "But it's already decided."

He cried for some time, then, before wiping his eyes enough to regard the tear-stained grave balefully. "Waiting for you to say something to dissuade me here. Kind of thought you'd be more passionately against it. But I'll take your silence as agreement."

He didn't know how long he sat there, words run out, before footsteps neared and Harry appeared. It must have been some time, because the sun had gone from brilliant summer obnoxiousness to a layered pink and golden-orange sunset. "There you are," Harry said, sounding a bit breathless. "I've been looking for you everywhere. There's something I need to tell you. Hermione thought you might be here, but I didn't think-"

"Hey," Draco said weakly, and struggled to come up with any excuse that didn't make him sound like a fascist in training. "I still haven't finished it, you know." He hastily wiped aside the rest of the sand in tear-wet patches on the stone. "It's still... real bare, so..."

"Did you come here to think?" Harry ventured, and Draco nodded, eyes still on the grave. It was close enough.

"I need to tell you something," Harry began, "That I realized at Dumbledore's funeral," and then stopped when he got a better look at Draco's face. "Have you been crying?"

"No!" Draco said quickly, worried that Harry would think he had been crying for Grindelwald. But that was far easier than explaining what really had drawn the tears from his tired eyes. "I was before. For the headmaster. That's all."

"Okay," Harry said, shifting uncomfortably above Draco. "Um, I have something I really need to tell you. Draco, I'm sorry, but I think we need to break up."

The words were incomprehensible at first to Draco. "What? What do you mean, break up?"

"Well, we were already taking a break," Harry said defensively, only to flinch away when Draco rose to his feet. "I just think it, er, isn't working out, Draco, and it would be for the best just to end it."

"What?" Draco said helplessly. *I was just crying over you, you bastard, and now it's like you don't care for me at all.* Except he knew how many times he must have made Harry feel exactly this way, over the years. Maybe that was why this was coming now. But he couldn't accept it anyway, deserved or not, not with so little time left.

"No!"

"What do you mean, no?" Harry asked, surprised, and when Draco took a step forward, he took a corresponding one backwards. "I'm breaking up with you, Draco. You can't just say no."

"Not unless you give me a reason," Draco insisted. He stared Harry right in the eye, finding Harry rather puffy-eyed and swollen-faced too, after sobbing at Dumbledore's funeral. Harry was really choosing to do this now? Had the spirit of Dumbledore descended to him and demanded he give that glorified Death Eater boyfriend of his the boot already?

Harry hesitated, and Draco stepped up and tried to take his hands. Harry shied away, wincing. "Don't. I can't think if you..." He was avoiding even Draco's gaze now.

That was as good as an admission, and Draco pounced on it. "So the problem isn't that you don't like me like that anymore, is it? You haven't gotten tired of that?" If Harry didn't even *want* him anymore, he knew everything was lost.

"No!" Harry exclaimed, truly flustered, gaze going to stare at his feet. "It's not that, of course not. It's not you at all, Draco, okay? I just... I told you, I realized something at Dumbledore's funeral. It was that I have to go away."

"Away," Draco echoed skeptically, but hope seizing through him again already.

"After Bill and Fleur's wedding, I have to leave Xaphan," Harry said miserably. "Alone. The Horcruxes, Draco, I have to go after them myself. It's what Dumbledore wanted me to do, that's why he told me all about them. If he was right- and I'm sure he was- there are still three of them out there. I've got to find and destroy them and then I've got to go after the seventh bit of Voldemort's soul, the bit that's still in his body, and I'm the one who's going to kill him-"

"Take me with you," Draco said immediately, and the remaining sunlight came out from behind a cloud, lighting Harry from behind as something heroic and dazzling, something maybe ephemeral that had to be clasped onto hard to retain any memory of that transient golden glow. Draco managed to seize Harry's hand. "I'll leave Xaphan. I don't care. You'll do what you have to, your Chosen One thing, and I'll protect you."

"That's why I'm trying to end this with you," Harry said in frustration. "To protect *you.* So I don't put anyone I care about in danger again-"

"Harry," Draco said heavily, and took Harry's chin with his other hand. Harry's gaze met his heartrendingly young and innocent, so earnestly trying to do the right thing even if it cost him what it did seem he really wanted. "Have you ever *met* me? Don't you understand that wherever I go, no matter who we face, I'm the dangerous one?" *How many bodies do I have to drop before you understand that charming fact, beloved*?

"Did I wound your dragon-sized ego?" Harry said softly, lips curling up, and Draco felt the urge like a lightning bolt to kiss him, but held himself back.

"You did, a little," Draco pouted, and Harry's eyes lit up, hopelessly fond, and Draco thought maybe he had him.

"I don't know where we'd be going, or what we'd have to do," Harry warned him. "I really think Dumbledore meant for me to take this path alone..."

"You can't, though," Draco said firmly. "You can do what you want about *us*, Harry. If you really want to throw this away, then do it. Make me just your friend. Your acquaintance, even. But it'll be an acquaintance going Horcrux-hunting with you. I'm not leaving your side for a second."

Harry laughed shakily. "You're impossible."

"Wait until you see," Draco said stubbornly, "Just how impossible I am. Try and leave me behind and I'll hunt you to the ends of the earth like *you* were Voldemort."

"That's what Ron and Hermione said," Harry admitted. "I mean- less, ah, colorfully, but still. They won't have any of me trying to go without them. They know about the Horcruxes too already, so they want to find them with me." *Of course they do. They were with you in the blue loop, weren't they? And now I will be too.* "They said that they'll go with me, wherever I go. I should have expected the same from you, shouldn't I? Even if we aren't, well-"

"We should be," Draco said at once, insistent with conviction. "We should be. So let's talk about us."

"We were talking about what will decide the fate of the world," Harry said disbelievingly. Draco snorted and tossed his head. They were staring at each other intently now, Draco cupping Harry's face, and Harry's fingers slid wonderingly through Draco's long pale hair. It was a sensation as good as sex, so bad it was that Draco found he wanted.

"We were," Draco agreed steadily, far from tears now, "And now we're on to something more important."

"More important," Harry repeated, and Draco nodded.

"That's right," Draco agreed. "You and me. That's all it comes down to. *I'll* find you the Horcruxes. I'll do it all, for you. Please. I'm sure we can save the world, if you'll only- please, if you'll just take me back again-"

"Are you begging?" Harry said wonderingly. "You're so proud, dragon. And you're-"

"I'm begging," Draco said unflinchingly, "Because you're worth begging for, Harry Potter," and felt his heart clench miserably, at the thought of Harry still turning him away. He could only hope Harry wouldn't tell their friends of this then, perhaps with concern, at how far Draco Black had disintegrated. But there was nothing to do but beg, thinking, *I can't die without being with you again, just one more time.* Though he was sure he would have the same exact thought, after "just" one more time.

"Stop that. You're insane," Harry said breathlessly, and Draco leaned in to let Harry kiss him, if he wanted. He felt a rush of blind rejection, so bitter it could have choked him, when Harry made no such move to do so. Instead, Harry rested their foreheads together. "Have you listened to a word I've said?" Draco nodded brightly, making Harry groan. "You really shouldn't come-"

"I don't give up that easily. Don't you know who I am?"

"There's that proud dragon I expected," Harry sighed, breath sliding over Draco's cheek. He showed no sign of pulling away from how close their faces were, as the light behind them began to recede under the gray-blue clouds that blocked the gilded sunset.

"I'm this terrible thing," Draco began, and waved Harry's objections away. "I'm this terrible, awful, violent broken thing, and if you think to protect *me* by keeping me away from you, all I can tell you is you don't understand what I am at all." No one did. "What I am is a weapon, and when I tell you I'll kill anyone who gets close to you, I-"

"You're not terrible," Harry whispered. "And you're not broken. It's just- Dumbledore gave me this mission alone, and-"

"Fuck Dumbledore," Draco snapped, and maybe there were kinder sentiments to be aired on the day of the man's funeral, but anything that would keep him away from Harry, he wanted nothing to do with it. "He had to have known I would come. Ron and Hermione too. We're coming and there's no getting around it. Case closed. There's only the question of what to do with Luna and Neville, and Ginny. Now-" Draco broke off, strident voice finally conquered by Harry hugging him close, where they remained as the sun set, beside Grindelwald's half-completed grave.

"I love you, you know," Harry whispered in Draco's ear, and Draco shivered at the feeling. "So much I can't stand it sometimes. I know what I should feel- know what I'm meant to do- but I- but *you*- I love you *too* much, Draco Black, and I..."

"Then kiss me," Draco breathed, staring into Harry's perfect eyes as the world around them grew darker. And Harry obeyed, finally, pressing his mouth to Draco's and letting that familiar melting feeling consume them at last, that unshakable draw together that had Draco panting soon and lunging in senseless with shut eyes. The sheer giddy sensation of Harry's nearness, his warmth, was enough to chase away the lingering insecurities at the edges, the doubts, even the awareness of death, so close by, waiting.

The children went home from Xaphan without real clarity as to where they would be returning in the fall. Xaphan would be sending its letters as well as Hogwarts, was as far as Draco could determine, not just to new first-years but to all of the once-Hogwarts students, inviting them back to the place that had proved their refuge from the attack. Draco had to wonder if all of the Slytherins would be receiving those invitations. Somehow he thought, say, Vince and Greg's might get lost in the mail.

He knew Theo wouldn't be sent one, an expelled student and known Death Eater after his actions at Nurmengard, but it still flickered uncomfortably through his head, the image of a letter sent out for no one to read. House Nott was fallen, the line come to an end in blood and fire. And Draco held the secret in the dagger in his pocket that marked him as unworthy of his return at last to Harry's affections, but he was done worrying about worthiness. Not with so little time left. Less than a year, it was. Draco could count the days, if he so desired. May 2nd. That would be the day he died. Everything until then was to be dedicated to ensuring his nine names would still be safe once he was gone.

The most cloudy of those names was currently inspecting the dungeons of Xaphan. Slughorn had no desire to stay on, so to speak, not as Xaphan's Potions master, and Severus had somehow miraculously agreed to step down from his long-desired position as Dark Arts teacher. He would be Potions master again, in the too-vast dungeons of Xaphan, a blank emptiness he would have to fill with *something* before the students returned again. Draco could picture Severus holding forth to a scared, enthralled mass of children with nothing but a cauldron before him in that great bleakness, saying, *I show you how to ensnare the mind and bewitch the senses...*

Blink, and the picture faded, the two of them alone in vast darkness again. "I have a question for my godfather," Draco said brightly, and Severus turned to regard him balefully.

"What does my burdensome godson require now?" Just the acknowledgment of the relationship showed how things were alright between them, as they should be. *I hope someday you understand what your burdensome godson is going to sacrifice for you.*

And he knew what was before him was worth the sacrifice.

"Oh, just, you seemed the person to ask," Draco said, and squinted. "If you, say, hypothetically, had taken charge of the final resting place of one of history's darkest wizards, and were looking for a simple yet tasteful message to engrave upon the stone, what would you write? Hypothetically. Asking for a friend."

It didn't get Draco any closer to an answer, but there was still a happiness to hearing that gruff voice bark out a horrified, "Out!"

"Love you!" Draco exclaimed cheerfully, before skittering away in obedience.

Severus wasn't the only one taking up a new position. Remus was taking up his old post as Defense teacher. Sirius was being taken on as Dueling Master. Somehow Draco doubted that Severus would be as willing to serve as his assistant as he had been for Gilderoy. Said golden-haired host, in fact, was employed yet again by what was de-facto Hogwarts in everything but name and place now: he would be teaching techniques to the older students for castle reconstruction, on the many parts of Xaphan that still remained unrestored. McGonagall would be headmistress and head of Gryffindor, Flitwick Charms professor and head of Ravenclaw, on and so forth, all taught beside the great white tomb of the man who had held Hogwarts for them against the dark until he, at last, had succumbed as well.

Draco found himself visiting Grindelwald's grave more often, though no closer to an answer of what to write. Harry followed him to it once, the hustle and bustle of Portkeys away from Xaphan for the students long since concluded, and settled on the ground beside Draco, letting his face slide into place from behind, looking over Draco's shoulder.

"Still don't know what to put on it?" he sighed, and Draco shook his head. Harry caught Draco by the chin and turned his face into a kiss that melted him down to his toes, but left him no closer to an answer, of what words he would have to leave behind him here, when he and Harry and everyone made their departure from Xaphan. He was dreading the letter to Remus and Sirius and Severus explaining it that he planned to leave behind. His much-vaunted articulateness had deserted him here completely, and so it was that he parted his lips from Harry's with that same frustrating vacancy in his mind when it came to the slab of stone below him.

"Did you enjoy that, Grindelwald?" Draco said dryly, licking his lips after the taste of Harry he'd gotten, even in such a place, the sea wind whipping at him from the side like an affirmation. "Yeah, I bet you did."

"Do you talk to him when you come here?" Harry asked, and Draco shrugged awkwardly.

"I just need to think what it should say," Draco sighed, and Harry wrapped his arms around his neck and gave him a few more lingering kisses before leaving him to the wind.

Maybe it was the aftertaste of Harry that made him think more. Maybe it was the knowledge of the plan they had waiting for them, three Horcruxes to destroy, that had him set at last on what to write on Grindelwald's grave. Or maybe it was the weight on his shoulders of the mission he would have to undertake alone.

By the end of that evening, he had departed that graveside, leaving behind the words

Gellert Grindelwald

1883-1997

He died with grace.

Draco could only hope they would be able to say the same of him, by the time his final act was through.

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